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Zane Grey's

No.18

WESTERN

MAGAZINE

THE MAVERICK QUEEN

A ZANE GREY NOVEL
(Magazine Abridgement)

I RODE WITH THE TEXAS RANGERS

Ira Aten's story as
told to Harold Preece

2/-

A FEUD NOVELETTE BY MARVIN DE VRIES
S. OMAR BARKER • WILL C. BROWN
ELMORE LEONARD • W. H. HUTCHINSON



**"No, damn you! Not if I
have to kill another man!"**

The Maverick Queen, Chap. 12



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This Month's Magazine Abridgment



TALL, GRAY-EYED LINC BRADWAY comes to the hell-roaring Wyoming town of South Pass on a grim errand—to clear up the mystery surrounding the death of his partner, Jimmy Weston. A few hours after his arrival, Linc, who packs a reputation for lightning speed on the draw, gives convincing proof of himself at the poker table as well as with his six-guns. The demonstration is enough to win the hate of the gambler Emery and his gang, and the love of Kit Bandon, the fascinating, fabulous "Maverick Queen" who has a weakness for handsome cowboys.

Linc soon learns that Jimmy Weston's death was connected with the systematic disappearance of unbranded calves from the ranches. Honest cowboys have turned to rustling—not for money—but for love of an irresistible woman whose name their rigid code of honor forbids them to reveal. When the ranchers organize a vigilante committee to drive the cowboys out of the country and whip one of them brutally to make him tell who is buying the stolen calves, the valley becomes a powder keg. And Linc finds himself caught in a red-hot range war.

Just as dangerous as the cowboy-cattleman feud is the alluring beauty of the Maverick Queen. Her love has proved the kiss of death for more than one man in the Sweet-water country—and Linc finds her a hard woman to resist. Only loyalty to the memory of his partner and his vow to avenge what he now knows was murder keep him from meeting a similar fate. With the help of Vince and Mel Thatcher, and a new purpose in the love of Lucy Bandon, Kit Bandon's niece, Linc fights on to see that justice is done and to earn his place on a new range.

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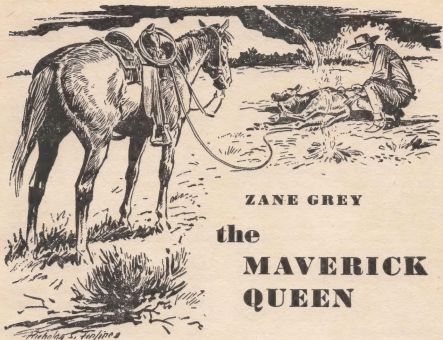
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ZANE GREY
the
MAVERICK
QUEEN

CHAPTER ONE

The Man from Nebraska

IT was almost dark, that day in early June, when the stage rolled down off the Wind River Mountains into the notorious mining town of South Pass, Wyoming. Lincoln Bradway alighted stiff and cramped from his long ride and asked a passer-by if there was a hotel in town.

"South Pass brags of twenty hotels, stranger, with a saloon to match each one of 'em. Take your choice," returned the man, with a laugh that derided Bradway's ignorance.

Bradway looked down a long wide street, lined by two straggling rows of dim yellow lights. He went by a number of hotel signs garish on high board

fronts, and finally found a lodginghouse away from the center of town. The proprietor was a pleasant-faced and hospitable woman who asked for her fee in advance. Lincoln paid for a week's rent. The keen-eyed woman observed his roll of greenbacks and favored him with a more attentive look.

"Where you hail from, cowboy?" she asked.

"Nebraska. How're things here?"

"Lively enough. You want work?"

"Not much."

"I reckoned that. Cowboys with a roll like you just flashed usually don't want work till the roll's gone, and in South Pass that'll not take long. I advise you to keep it hid."

"Thanks for the hunch, lady. Where'll I eat?"

"Try the Chink, half a block in town," she offered. "He can cook, and cowboys patronize him."

"Many of my kind hereabouts, lady?" continued the tall Nebraskan, casually.

"Not of *your* kind, cowboy," she retorted. "But there are a plenty of cowboys in western Wyoming. It's the coming cattle country."

"Lady, did you ever hear of a cowboy named Jimmy Weston?"

"I should say so, stranger! Jimmy used to stay with me. A mighty nice boy. Pity he—Say, who might you happen to be?"

"Well, Jimmy was my pard."

"Pard? Could you be the pard he was always bragging about? Lino something?" she queried.

"I am the pard, lady, Lincoln Bradway. And I've come out here to find out what happened to Jimmy."

"If you're smart, stranger, you'll keep quiet about your curiosity," she rejoined, her tone and manner altering subtly.

"Thanks, lady. I don't aim to make any sudden noise. Were you a friend of Jimmy's? Can you tell me anything?"

"No."

"Well, I'm sorry. You spoke sort of kindly of him."

"Stranger, I liked Jimmy Weston. It was hard for me to believe he was shot in a card game, for cheating."

Bradway made a swift, angry gesture. "Lady, that is a damned lie. Jimmy Weston never turned a crooked card in his life."

"Everybody in South Pass believes the—the talk," said the woman nervously.

"Did you?"

Her hurried nod did not deceive her lodger. He left her then, convinced that she knew more than she cared to

divulge. He had a job to do. Jim Weston's name had to be cleared. And someone had to answer for his death.

Bradway found the Chinaman's place, a tiny restaurant with a counter and a bench, and several tables covered with oilcloth. Three cowboys were emerging as the Nebraskan approached the door. Lincoln stepped aside into the shadow as they came out. They smelled of horses and rum. The third and last cowboy was tall, lean and set of face, tawny-haired.

"Aw, Mel, you're a sorehaid," growled one of his companions, a short bow-legged youth. "Lucy gave you a raw deal, and no wonder. But 'cause of that an' you bein' sore ain't no reason why Monty heah an' me cain't open our mouths."

"Hell it ain't!" flashed the cowboy called Mel. "Blab all you want, Smeade, but not about *that*. Not heah in town!"

"An' why'n the hell not? Even if it's never been admitted among us where an' for why them mavericks went, we know, an' you know damn wal, Mel Thatcher, that they—"

"No! I never admitted it," interrupted Thatcher. "There's some things you can't talk about on this range. Go on, you fool, and you'll get what Jimmy Weston got!"

Profoundly thoughtful, the Nebraskan went into the restaurant. While waiting for his meal he pondered the things he had heard. The name Lucy had occurred more than once in Jimmy's infrequent letters. Whoever that girl was, Jimmy had been sweet on her. And somehow she had given this cowboy Thatcher a raw deal. Then there was the implied peril of speaking out loud concerning something to do with mavericks. It so happened that an unbranded calf had been one of Jimmy's

weaknesses. Like most open-range riders he had been convinced that a maverick was any man's property.

After having appeased his hunger, Bradway got up, paid for his meal and went out into the street. It was quite dark and the air was thin and cold, with a tang of mountain snow.

He walked up through and beyond the center of the wide-open town. Then, crossing the street, he started back on the other side. Lincoln peered into every open door. He scrutinized every passer-by that he encountered. Miners, gamblers, flashily dressed women, cowboys and ranchers, teamsters and sheepmen, well-dressed travelers made up that passing throng.

After his survey of the town Bradway began methodically to enter each public place, from the canvas dens at the foot of the street, to the stores and saloons and gambling halls that bordered the sidewalk. He spent an hour of most diligent search before he again came upon Mel Thatcher and his two pals. Thatcher was standing beside a table where his two friends were playing cards with two other cowboys.

Thatcher's lean visage wore a worried look, but it showed none of the heat of dissipation that was reflected in the faces of the others. Lincoln watched them awhile.

"Howdy, Thatcher," he said coolly, as Thatcher wheeled at his touch. "I've been looking for you particular hard."

"Hell you say?" returned Thatcher. "Never saw you in my life, so you must be looking up the wrong man."

"Maybe so. I hope not. Come aside for a minute," replied Lincoln, and he led the curious cowboy away from the players. "I'm from over Nebraska way. Name is Linc Bradway. Ever hear it?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Do you remember coming out of the Chinaman's restaurant an hour or more ago?"

"Yes," said Thatcher.

"I heard you tell your loud-mouthed pard that if he didn't stop gabbing—he would get what Jimmy Weston got!"

Thatcher gulped. "Cowboy, I never said no such thing," he declared defiantly.

"Don't make me call you a liar," retorted Bradway. "I heard you. I was Jimmy Weston's pard for years. We rode trail together and bunked with a dozen outfits. He got in trouble back in Nebraska—lit out for Wyoming. He wrote me some queer things about a girl named Lucy, for instance, and another man—"

"Judas!" muttered Thatcher. "If you know what's good for you you'll shut up altogether."

"Thatcher, I've no way to make you talk, but if you're honest—if you were no enemy of Jimmy Weston's . . ."

"You can't hold me responsible for what's claimed in South Pass," protested Thatcher.

"I'm not holding you responsible," argued Bradway. "But I've a hunch that you know damn well Jimmy wasn't shot for cheating at cards."

"A hunch is nothing. You can't prove he wasn't."

"That's what I'm here for," said Bradway.

"Then my hunch to you is, beat it hell for leather off this range while the getting's good!"

"Thatcher, are you coming clean with what you know—or are you lining up with the dirty coward who shot my pardner?"

"I can't tell you—I don't know any more," returned Thatcher.

Lincoln stalked from the noisy saloon into the street. In a little shop down the street he bought a cigar from a young man who seemed to be of a friendly sort. "Been in this hole long?" asked Lincoln.

"Too long," replied the proprietor.

"Did you happen to know a cowboy by the name of Jimmy Weston?"

"Shore did. Liked Jimmy a lot. Did you know him?"

"Yes. I asked for him here, and heard he'd been shot. Where was Jimmy killed?" queried Bradway.

"Emery's place. Biggest gamblin' hell in town. It's called the *Leave It*. He was shot in a card game, for palmin' aces in a big jackpot—or so they said. No one except the gamblers saw the fight, or know who shot Jimmy. That was the talk."

"Any women hang around Emery's?"

"There's one. Kit Bandon, the Maverick Queen, they call her. Handsome as hell, an' when she cocks her eye at a man he's a goner."

"This Kit Bandon—what is she?"

"Runs a big cattle ranch down on the Sweetwater. Leans to mavericks. Her brand is K I T."

"Mavericks—well. Reckon she runs a two-bit outfit?"

"You might call it that. Kit hires cowboys for short spells, to round up and drive. Last fall she sent a thousand head of two-year olds to Rock Springs."

A couple of new customers diverted the cigar salesman from Bradway. He yawned and left the store. Presently across the street he espied a white two-story frame structure. It had an ornate balcony along the second story. Above on a high board front he saw the name: *Leave It* in large black letters in relief against the white. Lincoln crossed the street and entered, to find himself in

the largest hall he had ever seen. A bar ran its entire length, and it accommodated two rows of drinkers. There were a dozen or more games of chance all crowded with players, among whom he noticed several women. Could one of them possibly be the woman he was so curious to see? Then he espied a circle of eagerly watching men who were undoubtedly intent upon a big game. Bradway made his way through the arch and gradually he penetrated the circle until he could see over a man's shoulder to a card table, covered with gold and greenbacks, in front of six gamblers. He realized that this was the establishment's big game and that these were the individuals he wanted to watch. One was a handsome, dark young woman of perhaps twenty-five years. She wore a diamond as big as a gooseberry, and she was dressed in some black material becomingly relieved at the yoke and the waist by touches of red.

"That's her," whispered one of the men excitedly. "There's Kit Bandon, Queen of the Mavericks. She's afraid of the game, too, as usual."

Bradway found himself staring at the lovely, reckless, excited face of the Maverick Queen. Suddenly, one of the players directly in front of him threw down his cards.

"I'm cleaned. You're all too good for me," he said.

Without a word Bradway slipped into the vacated seat. He put a slow hand inside his coat. His heavy gun sheath had bumped the table, upsetting some of the stacks of yellow coin.

"Folks, I'm setting in," he announced coolly. His look, his manner, his quick action turned every eye in that group upon him. The Maverick Queen's dark, smoldering eyes were fixed upon him.

"This is no game for two-bit cow-boys," spoke up Emery, sharply.

"Money talks, doesn't it, same as in the gambling halls of Dodge and Abilene?" drawled Lincoln, and pulling out a tight roll of bills he dropped it on the table, exposing a one-hundred-dollar bill on the outside.

"Yes, money talks here, but not for everybody," snapped Emery.

"Is there anything offensive about me, lady?" asked Bradway.

"There certainly isn't. You're welcome to play," replied the woman, turning her back upon Emery and half nodding and smiling in Lincoln's direction.

"Thank you, Mister Emery, I'll take up your insult later. Is it a table-stakes or limit game?"

"Five dollar limit," said the rancher, "except in jackpots. Make your own limit then. . . . My name's Lee."

"Glad to meet you, Colonel. Mine's Bradway."

The next man, McKeever, sneered. Bradway felt an instinctive distrust of him that was even sharper than his feeling for Emery. The miner nodded his approval and the game began.

And real poker it turned out to be, for Bradway. He drew in nearly every hand, and almost always filled when he raised before the draw. Kit Bandon and the two gamblers pitted their united skill, and as much trickery as they could get away with against Bradway, only to be beaten at every turn. There was a charged atmosphere around that table. Kit Bandon was a sport, a good loser, a fascinating creature who thrived on excitement and danger. Her color was high and her eyes sparkled. And the glances she shot in the direction of the stranger conveyed more and more interest in his person than in his poker game.

Linc had met and played against greater gamblers than Emery and McKeever in his time, but none in whom he had encountered as much open hostility. Evidently they were determined to break the newcomer's luck. When their stake was gone they borrowed from Kit, who kept a goodly sum in front of her.

"Lady, you sure are a banker," drawled Bradway. "I hope when I get broke here in South Pass that you'll stake me to a few bits the way you have these local gents."

"You can bet on that," she countered sweetly.

"With your luck—and peculiar style of play you can't ever go broke," snarled Emery, with emphasis on the "peculiar."

"Sure, I'm lucky at cards," drawled the stranger, "but all-fired unlucky at love," and he smiled at Kit as he spoke.

"Cowboy, I just can't believe that last," she returned. Perhaps her arch look and warm tone accounted for the ill-concealed glint of hatred in Emery's gaze.

"Gentlemen, and Miss Bandon, the game has slowed up," continued Bradway. "Too much talk. And talk appears cheap in this town—I reckon almost as cheap as life."

"If that's one of your smart cracks, it just happens to be true," snapped Emery.

"In case there's anything personal in that remark, Mister Gambler, I reckon you-all haven't figured that the outfit who makes mine cheap will be biting sawdust ahead of me," drawled Linc.

"Who in hell are you?" demanded Emery. There was curiosity in his voice.

"Linc Bradway. Nephew of Cole Younger, if that means anything to you."

"Suppose we play one more jack," suggested Lee.

The hands were dealt, the pot opened, raised, and cards called for. Linc stayed on a pair of deuces and for once failed to add to the strength of his hand. Betting was light. When Bradway raised the limit of the money in front of Emery, he followed the lead of the others and threw his cards down in disgust. Then Lincoln laid down his pair of deuces.

Lee laughed. "He cleaned us all, and if I know poker he pulled as straight a game as I'll gamble he can shoot."

"Thanks, Colonel," said Bradway. "And now, Mister Emery, you can eat that hint about my peculiar play."

The circle of spectators shifted uneasily. "Bradway, no insult intended," Emery said.

"Emery, every look and word of yours to me has been insulting. I'm calling you."

Kit Bandon suddenly interposed. "Bradway, these friends of mine often forget there's a lady present. But you're a gentleman."

"Thanks, I haven't overlooked the fact that you're a thoroughbred in bad company."

"I reckon I can stick it out." She did not show the least fear of Bradway or concern for her friends.

"Kit, you forget what happened to the last cowboy you took a shine to," flashed Emery.

"Hell no, I haven't," she returned.

Linc, after pocketing his winnings, pounded the table with his left hand. His right was significantly not in sight. "Cut it, Miss Bandon, begging your pardon. Let Emery talk to me."

"Bradway, you're unreasonable," shouted Emery, shrilly. "I can't crawl

fish for something I may have said unintentionally."

"Crawfish—hell! Your liver is as white as your face. Lady, kindly get up and out of this."

Kit Bandon appeared fascinated by this drama in which a young and personable stranger was forcing the issue against her friends.

"Emery, you're a cheap gambler—a poor loser—a damned liar. Keep your hand out of that vest!" There was a mingling of whistling breaths, and the trampling scuffles of hurried feet.

Emery's white hand sank to the table. Out of the corner of one eye Bradway caught McKeever's hand slipping inside his vest. Then Bradway gave the table a tremendous shove and sprang erect, his gun leaping out.

CHAPTER TWO

A Friend

KIT BANDON, who had half risen just as the heavy table caught her, fell and rolled clear out of the alcove.

The gamblers both went down, with Emery under the table. But McKeever slid free and reached for the gun in his vest. Lincoln's shot broke the gambler's arm, for it flopped down, and the gun went spinning across the floor, McKeever let out a cry of fury and agony.

Linc swung the table off Emery, who then slowly labored erect. Kit, her face red with rage, stood brushing the sawdust off her black dress.

"Damned fools! I told you," she burst out, furiously. "Did he—kill Mac?"

"Looks that way," muttered Emery.

"No, I just winged him," spoke up

Bradway. "Miss Bandon, please excuse my rough manner."

"I excuse you, Mr. Bradway," she said, in a low voice, her dark eyes meeting his gaze.

"Emery, you made a crack to this lady a minute ago about what happened to the last cowboy she took a shine to," flashed Lincoln. "Wasn't that cowboy Jimmy Weston?" Amazement and fear held the gambler mute. Kit Bandon stared at Lincoln, startled.

"Weston was my pard," went on Bradway. "I've letters of his that give me a hunch as to what happened to him, and I came here to prove it. Get out, Emery."

Linc picked up the little gun and examined it. The weapon was a derringer and it had a large bore for such a small gun. He put it in his pocket.

Kit Bandon had arisen. She stood before Bradway, and was about to speak when he asked her: "How come such a fine girl as you could be hooked up with hombres as lowdown as these?"

"Mac is Emery's friend, not mine," she whispered hurriedly. "Jess and I—we have cattle deals. I own part of this place. It goes back to a long time ago. Bradway, I must see you—talk with you."

"Well, this is not the time nor place," he replied coldly, and left her. The crowd opened to let him pass through and out into the street, where he joined the stream of pedestrians on South Pass's main street.

Linc kept looking back to see if he was being followed. He could not be positive until he had cleared the center of town. He passed the last pedestrians on his side, and then crossed the street. He caught sight of two men whose actions were suspicious. Quickly he squared around, gun in hand. They

made a quick retreat down a dark alleyway. This enabled him to gain his lodginghouse before his pursuers could tell where he had gone.

Linc undressed and, turning out the light, he went to bed. He lay there in the dark thinking, and before he went to sleep he came to the conclusion that he must not let his feelings run away with his intelligence. He must learn more. Who was this Lucy? And the dazzling, seductive Kit Bandon? As sleep began to overpower him, his last thoughts were of the Maverick Queen.



Linc Bradway was awakened by a ray of sunshine that streaked through his little window. With daylight his mind again worked clearly. Lincoln went out on the street to have his first glimpse of South Pass in the light of day. He was agreeably surprised. It seemed the most picturesque mining town he had ever seen.

Entering the restaurant Lincoln found a few early birds, too hungry to pay any particular attention to him. He ordered a good meal that would last him the whole day and longer if necessary. Then Lincoln went out upon the street again, his gaze as restless as a compass needle. South Pass, by this time, had definitely awakened for the day. Lincoln crossed to the opposite corner, where he encountered Thatcher coming out of the store. The cowboy jerked up his head and stared.

"You must be more'n one feller," he said.

"Good morning, Mel. I saw you first," replied Linc, cheerfully.

"Yes, I'll bet that's your way."

"Look here, Thatcher you got me wrong. I'm not such a bad hombre, if I like you."

"Mebbe you're not at that. I was in the *Leave It* last night when you called them gamblers. I admit it looked pretty good to me, and others."

"You reckon they'll lay me out?"

"Sure do. You bucked the wrong tiger last night. I'm giving you a good hunch when I advise you to take the eight o'clock stage and vamoose."

"Thanks. You're right kind, or else you want to see the last of me around here."

"Doggone it, Bradway, won't you listen to no good advice from us cowboys?"

"Not if you're advising me to move on," concluded Lincoln, and turned up the cross street. The street ended at the bank. Entering, Lincoln presented himself at the counter and asked if he could exchange some gold and small currency for large bills. Other customers stamped in, some of them miners with sacks of gold dust. Linc lingered long enough to observe that gold, too, was far from rare in this camp.

On the way back to town he saw a livery stable and made for it with quicker step. He found in charge of the stable a cheerful red-bearded man of the miner type, who limped as he came out to meet Lincoln.

"Howdy, cowboy."

"Howdy, miner. How come you're dealing with horses?"

"Wal, son, when I had this laig broke I bought out Jeff Smith, an' hyar I am, not doin' so bad either for a miner."

"Say, anything to do with horses is good. Name is Bradway."

"Mine is Bill Headly."

"Bill, I want to buy a horse, and have someone to take care of him while I'm in town."

"I have not only one, but two horses hyar thet can't be beat in the Sweet-water Valley. A cowboy down on his luck—fired off his range—come to town. Red likker an' oyards. He sold his horses to me. He's due hyar at ten o'clock to get his money."

"How much?"

"Wal, he done it. I'm no horse buyer. I had to borrow the hundred dollars."

"Only one hundred for two good horses? You are a swindler. Here, take two hundred. I'm buying that cowboy's ponies."

Presently the man led out a sorrel, and a white-faced bay. Both were superb. That glossy bay, deep-chested, strong-limbed, would have thrilled any cowboy.

"Hyar comes Vince now," spoke up Headly.

A sturdy, bow-legged cowboy appeared shuffling slowly toward the stable.

"Headly, don't mention the sale right off," suggested Linc. How many times had he seen cowboys come or go like this! When the young man arrived, Linc saw a homely, sun-tanned young countenance, shadowed by two days' growth of beard.

"Howdy, Vince," spoke Headly. "Meet this young feller who jest called on me. Linc Bradway—Vince—I didn't get yore other handle."

"Vince is enough. What you lookin' over my horses for?" asked Vince. He was sober, but a little surly.

"Asked for a horse and Bill showed me yours. That sorrel is mighty nice. And the bay, he'd suit me. Which one do you fancy most?"

"Fancy? I raised 'em both from colts. Brick is the best horse on the Sweet-water, bar none. An' Bay is all horse too."

"Vince, I just bought both your horses," said Lincoln, quietly.

"Then it's too late?"

"Sorry, Vince. I been paid for them, an' hyar's yore hundred dollars," interposed Headly.

"I happen to have a weakness for good horses, too," Bradway said. "I bought Brick, but I'm giving him back to you."

Though disbelief leaped to his face, so did a light of hope.

"Just a present from a flush cowboy to one down on his luck."

"But, what's up yore sleeve?"

"There's nothing up my sleeve," replied Lincoln. "I felt sorry you had to sell your horses. That you had been fired. And I like your looks."

"I shore like yore's. But ain't you got no other reason at all?"

"None. I'm a long way from home, and I've made enemies."

"You've made a friend, too. One who'll stick to you till hell freezes over."

"Where's your gun?" Bradway asked. "Or don't you pack one?"

"Yes, I pack hardware," Vince replied. "But mine's in hock."

"You can't trail around with me without being heeled," said Bradway.

"Am I goin' to trail with you?" the cowboy asked, eagerly.

"Didn't you make a statement about sticking to me?"

"Let me tell you that I'm a ruined cowboy on this range."

"You mean there's no outfit you can ride with any more?"

"Not in the valley. I cain't tell you, pard."

"Tell me nothing. Let's reclaim your gun. Bill, take better care of Brick and Bay from now on."

They walked down the street. He

passed some greenbacks to Vince. "Get your gun out. Then meet me in front of that outfitting store."

Bradway strolled along, watching everything that went on in the street. Some boys were playing dangerously close to the street, and a spirited team hitched to a buckboard came within a few inches of running them down. The youngsters were scrambling on the board sidewalk, and one of them, the oldest evidently, had bent over to pick up something.

"Hey, kid, you're too big to be sprawling in front of horses," said Linc, severely. He made a grab at the youngster, but he dodged and piled headfirst into the three smaller ones and down they went.

The lad Linc tried to seize leaped up with amazing agility. The cowboy looked into the scarlet face and blazing eyes of a girl dressed in boy's clothes. "What do you mean?" she blazed.

"Oh! a girl—excuse me—miss," faltered Linc. "I—I thought you were a boy old enough to set these little tykes a better example—" He stopped in confusion.

"You did—like hob!" she retorted. "Keep your hands off me!"

Clinking spurs announced the presence of Vince, who stepped between the girl and the Nebraskan.

"Lucy, this cowboy is my pardner."

"He attacked me. I was just trying to stop the boys fighting—"

"Yes, she's right, I did, Vince. I took him—her—for a boy—too close to the street. I just tried to restrain her. I'm sorry."

"Lucy, this is Linc Bradway."

Linc had been struck dumb by that name, Lucy—by the change he noted in the girl's expression.

"Did you say—Linc Bradway?" she faltered.

Suddenly the girl's hands seized Linc's arm and she leaned toward him. Lincoln thought she meant to kiss him.

"Linc Bradway?" she breathed. "I know you very well. I was Jimmy Weston's girl—Lucy Bandon!"

CHAPTER THREE

A Desert Flower

LUCY BANDON!" stammered Lincoln. They stared at each other, oblivious of the gaping Vince. As Linc looked down at this sweet-faced girl, he found himself wishing that she would cling to him all his life.

"Jimmy told me all about you. He worshiped you."

"You were engaged to him?" asked Bradway.

"It never went that far."

"In love with him?"

"Hardly that. I liked him very much. Perhaps I'd have fallen in love with him some day. But, it happened, and—"

"You mean he was shot?"

"No, I don't mean that. But I can't talk to you in the street."

"Lucy, I must see you. Please give me an opportunity."

"I want to see you, too. But it won't do here in town. I'm driving out home at once. Alone. Aunt Kit is terribly upset. She is staying here. She sent me home. Please follow me on horseback. Catch up with me on the hill."

Then she was gone, leaving Lincoln standing there as one in a trance.

"That girl couldn't be—what I almost thought," muttered Linc. "Why Jim never gave me half an idea what a wonderful person she is!"

"Pard, I'll tell you that Lucy Bandon is as clean and sweet as a desert flower—as different from her aunt Kit Bandon as day is from night," declared Vince.

"So Kit Bandon is her aunt!"

"Yep," said Vince.

"Jim's girl—Kit Bandon's niece!—she asked me to follow her. We'll ride out of town up the brook, and hit the road over the hill. But not together. You trail me a couple of miles back."

Linc rode out and on across the flat between the slope of the hill and the edge of the town. Long before he got to the brook beyond the last house he espied Lucy, seated in a buckboard driving two horses, climbing the winding road. He watched her until she drove out of sight. He was half through the Pass without having caught sight of Lucy Bandon again. He wondered how he could have missed her. Suddenly he swung round a rocky outcropping and he saw Lucy. She had slowed down.

"I thought something might have stopped you," cried the smiling girl. "And when I did see you at last, I thought you'd never catch me." He dismounted and came over, hat in hand, and stood by the front wheel of the rig.

"Oh, Linc, I'm so embarrassed over the way I treated you down in the village in front of Vince—"

"I deserved it, Lucy. But I want to see you again—often—there's so much I want to say. How far to your home?"

"Twelve miles from the hill. Halfway across the valley."

"I can never say all I want to say in twelve miles. And I hope you'll want to say something, too! Won't you stop awhile?"

"I have all day to get home. Perhaps it'll take that long for me to—"

Linc interrupted her gently. "Lucy,

I reckon you know why I came out here. I had to come when I heard about him—what they were saying about him. But I never was prepared for anything like you. Of course I knew from Jimmy's letters that there was a Lucy—a sweet kid. But I hardly took him seriously. I'm afraid my impressions were not flattering to you."

"Jim made you his hero—and I'm afraid you became mine, too," she said simply.

"Suppose I tell you some things about myself that Jimmy never knew?" said the cowboy softly. He was twenty-three, but much older than his years. He had been born in Missouri somewhere, and his father, whom he had never seen, had been a brother or cousin to the notorious Cole Younger, the elder, a guerrilla after the war, and later a notorious desperado. In fact, Linc had never known either of his parents. By the time he was sixteen he had landed in Nebraska. There he had become Jim Weston's partner and there he had ridden the ranges until the news filtered back of Jim's death.

"Were you expecting someone?" the girl inquired. "I saw you looking back."

"I told Vince to follow me," he said.

"We'll watch for him. It makes me excited and happy to think of showing you my Wyoming."

"Wait a moment, please," said Linc, taking her hand and holding her back. She did not withdraw her hand. "Now it's your turn to tell me about yourself. That's more important than all the scenery in the world."

"My story is almost as filled with loneliness as yours. I don't remember any mother, only my aunt. I was twelve when we came west. First we lived on a ranch near Cheyenne. Then some man followed Kit. She shot him! She's

killed two other men since we came to South Pass several years ago. A gambler and a cattleman."

"That handsome-looking girl a killer?"

"She looks twenty-five, but Aunt Kit is older."

"I guess there are times when you just have to use a gun," he said. "But enough of Miss Bandon; I want to know more about you."

"There isn't much more. Aunt Kit's a strange woman. But she was always good and loving to me until we came to South Pass. She suddenly got interested in gambling. She really owns the *Leave It*, you know. Then she bought a ranch out on the Sweetwater, and took to cattle raising. Naturally that brought cowboys. I was the only girl around. They seemed to like me. She would have none of that. Then Jimmy came. I met him by accident, same as you, only he wasn't so rude!" Lucy smiled. "After that we met often enough to get to like each other before Aunt Kit found out. She was terribly angry. She forbade me seeing Jimmy. But I couldn't keep him from waylaying me out on the ranch or there in town. In spite of his feeling for me, Jim became as infatuated with Aunt Kit as all the other cowboys were. We quarreled. He took to gambling and drinking, no more the happy-go-lucky cowboy I had grown to like. We made up. I forgave him because he swore to keep a promise to me. And he broke it. I never saw him again. Soon after that he was shot. Pitiful little story, isn't it?"

"Pitiful and tragic," replied Lincoln.

"Thanks for confiding in me, Lucy."

"Lincoln, you said this morning that you had come on a rather grim errand. How did you know where to come?"

"Jimmy's letters. Jimmy was weak, but he was honest. He couldn't cheat. I'm as sure as I stand here that he was murdered."

"Jim said if anything happened to him you would come out here and kill everyone who—"

"Lucy, what would you think if I allowed Jim's murderer to go scot-free?" he demanded.

"Revenge can't bring Jim back."

"No!—But I'd have no self-respect left if I didn't avenge my partner."

"They will kill you," she cried.

"Who are *they*?"

"Emery and his outfit. I heard what you did last night. But these men will not meet you openly. There are many low-down dogs at Emery's beck and call. They would knife or shoot you for two bits. I don't want you to be killed."

"But *why* do you think Emery's outfit is on my trail? Because I cleaned him at cards?"

"Oh, it happened before, with far less reason. Last night at the hotel, I heard Aunt Kit cursing Emery. They were in her room, which was next to mine. My aunt and Emery had been talking too low for me to tell what they said, until they began to quarrel. Kit said: 'I won't let you shoot Bradway!' and Emery swore: 'You can go to hell, Kit. This cowboy is dangerous. He's got to be put out of the way. The letters he bragged about—from Weston. We can't afford to have him on this range with those letters in his possession. You ought to have sense enough to see that!'"

"So, that's why? Lucy, it might barely have been possible for you to persuade me to run away. But not now."

"And why not now?"

"Lucy, suppose I fell in love with you

at first sight?" he asked, simply.

She gave a little cry, and suddenly sat down, as if her limbs had grown weak. Probably this revelation of his was nothing new to her—a pretty girl in this world of men must be able to read a man's mind.

"Same old story, eh?" he asked.

"Yes, always the same—with cow-boys. It seems so easy for a man to say—and do," she replied sadly. "With a girl—it's different."

"I'll admit that it couldn't be as easy for you to fall in love with me as it was for me to fall in love with you. Is it a crime to fall in love, Lucy?"

"I thought you were different," said the girl.

"I am a man. I have known you only a few hours except for Jim's letters. But is there any reason why I shouldn't fall in love with you?"

"Forgive me, Lincoln. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"What have I done or what am I doing that a girl like you hates, Lucy?" He caught the lapels of her jacket, to draw her closer.

"It wouldn't keep you from *her*. It didn't keep Jim," she returned, with bitterness.

"From whom?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know! From *her*!"

"Do you really hate your aunt?" he asked gently.

"I do. I used to love her. But when she took Jimmy—ruined him—I had to hate her."

"Granted Kit Bandon is an irresistible woman. You can keep me from her. Do you want to?"

"Yes, I want to, Linc, more than anything ever in my life. But a girl can't give her trust or her love the way she'd give her glove. Lincoln, I'm so weak, and she's so strong. She just has to

crook her finger. And the men—she'll want to use you the same way."

"You've had a rotten deal, Lucy. But I'm going to try to make up for it. I'm pretty disgusted with myself for upsetting you the way I have. Lucy, you've been seeing only the dark, hard side of everything," he said, earnestly. "Really there is a brighter one. You're a spunky girl—as you very plainly showed me down in South Pass this morning. You don't have to stay with your aunt if it's hard for you—"

"Somehow you give me hope. Even if I haven't told you everything—"

"Sure. I savvied that. You have a sense of duty and honor if some other people haven't. You needn't tell me anything you think oughtn't be told. I'll find out what I can for myself. If I had come out here before Jim—before it was too late, I'd have fought his battle and yours. Now I have only yours."

"I think I'll go now, Linc."

"You'll see me again?" he asked.

"Yes. Any time and any place. *She* can't stop me this time."

"You ride often?"

"Half the time. We have no cowboys right now. I ride around a good deal, trying to keep track of stock. But it drifts all over the valley."

"Well! A cowgirl! You can meet me without trouble, then. Could you see smoke signals from this point?"

"Yes, easily on clear days."

"Say on the third morning from this. That will be Wednesday. Look for smoke after breakfast. I might not be able to come. There's much for me to do."

"I'll be looking for smoke on Wednesday," she said.

They returned to the buckboard. Lincoln untied the horses while Lucy climbed over the high wheel to take up

the reins. Then the Nebraskan's roving eye caught sight of Vince loping his horse along the road.

"Howdy, Vince. Anything on your mind?"

"Wagon just turned off the main road on to this one," replied Vince. Then he doffed his sombrero. "Lucy, I never seen you look so pretty."

"You look sort of pert yourself," she retorted.

"Lucy, hadn't you better rustle ahead and get out of sight over the hill before someone comes along the road? Good-by. Don't forget!"

"Don't you forget!" She drove the team into the sage. In a few moments she had reached the road and turned to the left waving a hand as the buckboard dipped below the crest of the hill.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I call Your Hand!"

IT WAS late in the afternoon when Linc Bradway rode into Headly's place. He was greeted by the ex-miner in a manner that indicated to him that Vince had said the right things about him. But Linc added his own two cents' worth. And Bill seemed to see things his way.

The street was so crowded at this hour that the Nebraskan felt reasonably safe. Near the Four Corners he ran into Lee. "Howdy, Colonel," drawled Linc, at the southerner's cordial greeting, and he shook his hand.

"I've been looking for you all day," began Lee.

"Well, I made myself kind of scarce," replied Lincoln.

"You showed your good sense. I can

give you a job down in the valley, Bradway."

"Thanks, Colonel. But I got a job to do here."

"I'd like to be your friend. You won my respect last night, not to say more. Come and have supper with me. We can talk."

"Colonel, that might be a risk to you. I'm expecting gunplay from any quarter any time now."

"Yes, and you'll get it, too, but hardly in the open. Bradway, the job I want you to take is to boss a bunch of range riders. I'm organizing a secret outfit, something like the California Vigilantes. You'd be just the man to lead them."

"Vigilantes, eh!—What for? There don't appear to be any big rustlers working these parts yet."

"That's all you know, young man," returned Lee, harshly. "At least about western Wyoming. I'd like to give you a responsible position for several reasons. One in particular! Think it over, Bradway. I'll see you next week."

A few minutes later Linc located the doctor's hand-painted sign and climbed up to find the office. "Good day, sir. Are you Dr. Williamson?" asked Linc.

"I am that, worse luck. What can I do for you?" replied the doctor. He had a heavy countenance, lighted by cavernous eyes and equipped with a bulbous red nose. "Strikes me you appear a pretty healthy cowboy."

"How'd you like to make a hundred dollars?"

"Young man, there's very little in this sorry town I wouldn't do for that much—inside or out of my profession."

"Do you remember when Jimmy Weston was shot here in South Pass?"

"Yes. Weston was killed something over two months ago. I have the date."

"Do you know where he's buried?"

"I could find his grave for you. I know the fellow who buried him."

"Doc, get that fellow to—to dig Weston up—and you find out if he was shot with a gun like this," said Lincoln, and he produced the little derringer.

"It's a strange request, cowboy," returned the doctor. "But I'll do it for the sum offered—in advance. You'll excuse me. Here in South Pass people seem to neglect a physician's bills—also the unimportant fact that he has to live as well as anybody else."

"Here you are. When can I call for your report?"

"By this time tomorrow I'll have the job done."

Lincoln left the office and made his way down to the street again. Presently Lincoln turned the corner of the street, and set out on a roundabout way to his lodgings. He reached his little room without meeting anyone; here he leisurely washed, shaved, and changed his shirt and scarf. He also buckled on a second gun.

Linc started down the street, suddenly to be startled by Vince appearing apparently from behind a board fence.

"Pard, the opposition, whoever in the hell they are, have made the first move. They figure you're like all cowboys. You can't stay from cyard games while you've got money. An' if you stay away Kit Bandon will lure you back. Reckon they want yore money first an' then yore life."

"Kit Bandon doesn't want me shot—not right away, at least," murmured Lincoln. "Lucy heard her quarreling with Emery about that very thing."

"Wal, mebbe the Queen has some particular reason to want you alive for a spell. Don't trust that dame, pard, even if she gets stuck on you, which she

shore will. Anyway, you're slated to buck the tiger again. An' a gun-slinger from Atlantic, the other minin' town, is heah to beat you to a gun."

"Vince, Emery isn't being very smart. That's a poor way to try to get rid of me."

"What the hell does he care? He'd try every chance 'cept that of meetin' you himself. South Pass isn't old enough yet to have its eyeteeth out. There's never been a real gunman heah yet, unless you're him. Thet gamblin' outfit could hire men to kill for two bits."

"Reckon my deal is to see them first," muttered Lincoln.

"Wal, so long as you're hell bent in goin' ahead with yore deal, another crack at them will make you all the stronger. There'll be one or more of thet outfit hangin' back somewhere, aimin' to plug you from where it's safe."

"How'd you get this information?"

"Bill tipped me off first. Thet hombre from Atlantic rode over hossback. Answers to the handle Gun Haskel. Wal, he was a big whiskered gent, double loaded with artillery, an' Bill said he was a loud-mouthed feller who made no bones of claimin' he was sent for to put some slick cowboy out of the way."

"Wonder what his plan is?"

"Easy as pie to figger. Fust locate you—size you up—insult you or somethin' accordin' to the lay of the ground, an' then set across from you in thet cyard game at Emery's."

"Vince, you're not so slow. You'll be a mighty helpful pard, especially if you can handle that gun. Go in Emery's place and look around. If you locate Haskel, or any other suspicious hombre, be in sight when I step in. If you're not in sight, I won't look for action pronto."

"I savvy, pard. An' it'll be my particular job to bore any hombre who acts queer behind yore back."

Linc watched his friend trudge off in the direction of the *Leave It*. Then the Nebraskan, slowly following him down the center of the street—which he shared with many other pedestrians who had been crowded off the narrow board sidewalk—saw Vince saunter through the wide portal of Emery's brightly lighted emporium. This deliberate hunting for trouble was a new experience for him. But his mood, usually cool, began to take on a feeling of excitement. As he stepped into the bright, garish hall, Vince stalked past him. Out of the corner of his mouth he whispered: "Rustle back!"

At the same instant he became aware of a white figure standing at the foot of a stairway just to the right of the entrance. Kit Bandon ran to catch his arm, her usually florid face as white as her dress.

"Wait! Don't go in there. Come with me!"

Steeled to draw a gun and kill an enemy, Bradway felt helpless before this beautiful woman. She drew her bare arm under his, and pulling him close to her fragrant and bewildering person, almost dragged him up the narrow stairway. The ceiling above the landing was so low that Lincoln had to bend his head. There was an open door leading into a little parlor where a lamp under a colored shade gave a subdued light. Kit Bandon drew the bewildered cowboy into this room and closed the door behind her.

Then for the first time Linc turned to look at her. The white gown augmented her lush beauty. He caught a glint of diamonds. But the Nebraskan was only half conscious of these de-

talls; it was her face that transfixed him. He had never looked into such a passionate and alluring face as the Maverick Queen's.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

It was as if fire has taken the place of blood in his veins. His knees seemed to have turned to water. Still he released himself from her arms. Afterward he was never able to recall where he found the strength to resist those enticing lips, those hungry arms. But resist them he did.

"That'll be about all—Kit," he said, hoarsely.

"But it was a great deal, wasn't it?" she replied, softly. "Linc, will you come out to my ranch?"

"What for?" he parried.

"To get away from this deal to put you out of the way."

"I can't do that, Kit. I'm not the kind to run from anyone."

"Then meet this Haskell. Outside in the street. You don't have any fear for yourself, do you?"

"Hardly."

"Haskell is a trigger-happy lout," she went on. "He has been in shooting scrapes. But to meet you in an even break he knows would be suicide. I dared Emery to meet you like a man."

"You did? . . . Kit Bandon, you're beyond me," exclaimed Lincoln, half-admiringly.

"I'm what you would call a fickle woman," she said, with her dazzling smile. "But I tell you I never before met a cowboy like you. Or such a really dangerous man that I could love!"

Again she threw herself upon him, but this time Linc coolly took her arms from about his neck, and stepped back.

"Kit, please don't make a damn fool of yourself nor of me either. You've had your little scene, as you must have

many a time before. You've only seen me twice—only been with me once. I'm one cowboy who don't tie easy, don't fool easy, and don't kill easy. Don't make me think any worse of you, than you are."

"No man would dare say so if he did think it." Her voice which a moment ago had been so warm, was now cold with anger. She had suffered a repulse, obviously something wholly unprecedented in her experience.

"You will make me love you," she cried, almost desperately.

"Kit, I won't make you do anything but behave reasonably," he declared. "Let's get this over. Thanks for keeping me from butting into more than I'd figured on."

"What are you going to do?"

"First look up this man Haskell."

"I want to see you meet him, but not inside here. Let me go down with you. Even these dogs wouldn't shoot you while you're with me." She opened the door and went out on the landing. It struck Linc that Emery's place was unusually quiet. Kit looked down over the banisters, then she motioned Lincoln to come out. The Nebraskan followed Kit Bandon as far as the landing. Letting go with a shrill cowboy yell, so harsh and earsplitting that it silenced the hum below, Lincoln vaulted the stair railing, to land on the floor of the flimsily-built house with a jar that shook the glasses off the shelves behind the bar. As he stalked toward the alcove there was not a movement among the dozen or more men present, except the furtive glances of their eyes. There were five at Emery's table, including a heavy-whiskered individual, who sat across from a vacant chair. Emery's white hands dropped flat on his cards to conceal their shaking. Two miners

and a well-dressed man, evidently a traveler, completed the quintet.

Lincoln waved a greeting with a quick left hand. His right appeared tense at his hip. "You fellows are in bad company," he said curtly. "Don't you know it?"

Vince suddenly appeared staggering through the alcove, giving a realistic performance as a drunken cowboy.

"Whas goin' on in here?" he asked, and he lurched to a point behind Emery, where he backed against the wall.

"You looking for me, Gun Haskel, by any chance?" demanded Lincoln.

"Who're you?" snarled the other.

"I'm Linc Bradway. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Nothing at all. Never heard of you till today."

"What did you want with me?"

"I wanted some of yore game."

"Not with guns!"

"Fact is, I heerd you was a hot gambler who'd won a big stake. I was layin' to git my share of it."

"You're a liar! You bragged in every saloon in town of what you had ridden in here to do. Everybody in South Pass knows it. Could it be you're yellow, Gun Haskel?"

"Is thet so?" blustered Haskel. He did not like the situation. The last thing he wanted was to be taunted by some cowboy who had been misrepresented to him.

"I know your kind," flashed Bradway. "You're one of these cheap four-flushers. Gun Haskel?—What a joke! Do you pack a gun? Or do you carry a little toy pistol like your cheating card-sharp Emery here?"

The giant let out a rather hollow laugh and looked around to see how the crowd was taking it. He was caught in a trap.

"No, I ain't packin' any toy pistol," he muttered, and his right hand edged slowly off the table.

"Pull it out if you're game!" the Nebraskan demanded.

Haskel did not react to that demand. His hand came away from his hip. Bradway waited a long moment, then he relaxed.

"Haskel, I called you and you crawled. You're smart enough to save your life. But you're stupid to mix with this rattlesnake outfit here."

Lincoln backed out through the alcove into the barroom which was now comparatively empty. As he passed through the barroom, Haskel could be heard pounding the table and bellowing at Emery. The Atlantic gunman was being answered by the taunts of the gamblers. Kit Bandon stood at the foot of the stairs. She met Lincoln at the door with a smile and look that almost any man but the Nebraskan would have given all he owned to receive.

"Linc, it was as good as a show. Only why didn't you bore him? You'll have to eventually. They'll nag and egg him on to a draw until he goes after you. Come with me."

"No. I've got to walk the street."

"All right. I'll walk with you."

"My God, what manner of woman are you anyway?" cried Bradway.

"I wouldn't miss seeing you shoot that fool's white liver out for anything. And wild horses couldn't keep me from being here when you call Emery."

Lincoln stalked out into the street, in a hurry to escape from the Maverick Queen's distracting person and speech. The crowd in front of the *Leave It* opened to let the cowboy through. He felt aware of a multitude of eyes, as he began his stalk up and down the street.

This was the custom of the West. And the public always favored the man who waited for his enemy.



In a quarter of an hour all of South Pass knew there was a fight imminent. Watchers lined up on each side of the street at a safe distance. As soon as Bradway had passed by the *Leave It* he crossed to the opposite side of the wide street, where fewer lights permitted deeper patches of shadow. His alert eye had caught the opening of a door on the little balcony above the *Leave It* doorway. It remained open though no one appeared. From that moment Lincoln shortened his promenade so that he could keep his eyes on the second floor of Emery's saloon. He was prepared for the muffled bang of a gun and to see a man stagger out on the balcony. His hands were upraised. From one of them dropped a rifle that clanged to the street below, and after it hurtled the body of its late owner. Hoarse cries rose from the spectators on the other side of the street. They believed the motionless body to be that of Gun Haskell, but it was not. One of Emery's henchmen had stolen aloft to the upper floor, where he had stood back in the dark with a rifle. Vince had accounted for him. Outside the saloon the crowd suddenly became quiet, and no one moved. But inside loud, furious voices and taunting laughs were evidence that they still were goading Haskell. Suddenly the white form of Kit Bandon emerged from the door. She waved a white handkerchief down the street. Could she be warning him? Suddenly the giant Haskell came plunging

out across the walk. He had a gun in each hand.

"Haskell! Better go back! If you're raring to shoot someone make it that snake Emery!" called out Bradway from the sidewalk.

Haskell stumbled over the prostrate body on the walk and kicked the rifle into the street. "Whar are you, cowboy?" roared the giant.

"Far enough, Haskell!" Lincoln warned. His gun glinted in the light of a store window. The giant sighted his adversary, and lurched across the dusty street, both guns swinging to cover the motionless Nebraskan.

"Nothin' agin' you, cowboy, 'cept yore sharp tongue. But I'm aimin' to kill you."

Two shots going off almost together, halted Haskell's stumbling advance. Bradway ran quickly to where the bearded giant lay and bent over him. "Come here, somebody," he shouted to the line of watchers. "Anybody who has the nerver!"

This taunt brought two bystanders running into the street. One was a young rider in boots and spurs, the other the well-dressed traveler who had left the poker game at Lincoln's suggestion.

"Haskell!" cried Linc, bending over the giant. "Did Emery put you up to this?"

The giant's ox eyes rolled, and his beard and chin wobbled from side to side as Linc tried to lift him to a sitting position.

"Sealover came after—me offered me—thousand . . . Emery's—hand—back." Haskell's mouth remained open, but he said no more.

"Men, you heard?" queried Lincoln, of the two beside him.

"Wal, we shore did," replied the cow-

boy. The other witness nodded his head, while he mopped his brow.

As Bradway straightened to face about, Kit Bandon came hurrying into the street. With a sudden cry Kit caught his arm, only to be shaken off. She had to run to keep up with him. "Awful mess you made of him. Linc, Emery will be worse than ever *unless you kill him!*" This last she whispered, close at Lincoln's side. But the Nebraskan did not seem to hear. All of his faculties were intent on the next move in this brutal drama.

Emery, with half a dozen other men, one of them a white-aproned bartender, stood under the bright light, in a half-circle. The gambler's eyes burned out of a face that was ash white. As he saw Bradway advancing with Kit clinging to his arm he backed hurriedly toward the door, only to bump into one of the men, who promptly shoved him forward. Linc saw that the man behind Emery was Vince. Now it was too late for the gambler to get away.

"Bandon, let go of that cowboy," he shouted. She obeyed him. "Anyone would think to see you hanging on to that stranger, that you were on his side."

"I am, but he'll never believe me," she retorted. "He's one cowboy against this whole cut-throat outfit. You see: I told you."

"Shut up, you man-crazy hellcat!" Then Bradway confronted him over the dead man on the sidewalk. The Nebraskan touched the prostrate figure with the toe of his boot; but he did not lower his eyes from those of the man before him.

"Is this man Sealover?" he asked.

"No. His name is Mike something or other. Whatever he had in mind he was on his own."

"Yes, and you'll claim that Sealover rode over to Atlantic after Haskel on his own, too," sneered Linc, shaking himself free from the woman's clinging arm. "But no use to lie. Haskel told me you were behind this. I have two witnesses to his statement. An' they're right here."

With a sweep of his gun Lincoln indicated the cowboy and the traveler who had left the spot where Haskel had fallen and now stood on the sidewalk. It was the cowboy who spoke:

"Thet's true, Mr. Emery. I heard him."

The traveler, pale of face, and obviously reluctant to be drawn into this fight, nevertheless corroborated the cowboy's testimony.

Emery barely glanced in the direction of the two witnesses, then turned again toward the Maverick Queen. "Miss Bandon, if *you* step in line with these two witnesses I suppose Bradway will force me to meet him. In that case I'll ask for time to give him a little information he will be glad to know about *you*."

A blow in her face could hardly have had more effect upon Kit Bandon than the gambler's threat. For an instant the smooth beauty of her white face seemed to shrivel. Suddenly she looked old. "Jess, I didn't hear what Haskel said. My interest in this cowboy was only in fair play. You know me."

"I should say I do!" snarled Emery—"where cowboys are concerned."

Bradway interrupted. "See here, Emery! Leave the woman out of this. You slimy, yellow snake, your hand is called. But for one thing—just one thing—I'd bore you where you stand."

"Just one thing I suppose I'm to be grateful for?" snarled Emery. "Could it be, by any chance, that one thing

might be this frail and lovely creature who seems to have fallen for another cowboy?"

"No!" roared Bradway. "That one thing is to see you hanged!"

The gambler stared. His amazement overpowered all his other emotions. Hanging had not yet come as far west as South Pass. Emery tried to step back from the tall Nebraskan, but Vince pushed him forward again.

"Who's going to do it?" blustered the gambler.

"That's one you can ask yourself," replied Bradway, "and I'll be glad to help you find the answer." Wheeling abruptly Linc slipped into the shadow beyond the lighted doorway and strode swiftly away behind the crowd that had gathered.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Blank Wall

IT WAS noon in South Pass, the quietest hour of the twenty-four. Passing the center of town Bradway went on to Headly's stable. Vince had been gone for some time, the liveryman said. Lincoln holed up in the tiny office, watching the street and the passers-by. A stage stopped for an exchange of horses. Some time after the stage had departed Vince limped up the street on his high heels to the livery stable, and was just asking for his partner when he espied him.

"Gosh, I didn't run into you nowhere," he complained.

"Vince, you're bursting with news," said Linc. "Come out with it."

"There's news afoot that ranchers in the valley air formin' a secret band of night riders. Rustlers workin' down

the valley near Red Desert. I heerd that if Kit Bandon breaks with Emery he will get run out of South Pass. She left this mawnin' early for her ranch. I had a look at Emery. He was mad as a hornet. He was with Sealover. It 'pears that Emery is thought damn pore of about town. O' course he always was, as I know, but this fracas with you an' the dirty bizness it brought to light, has hurt him with the decent town folks, of which there are quite some few."

"If I can only lay low and go slow! That's almost impossible in this kind of a deal. Right now, I've an appointment with Doc Williamson. Meet me at this first little restaurant down the street, just about dark."

"Okay, pard."

Lincoln found the doctor in, and evidently awaiting him.

"I see you are on time," was his greeting.

"Have you any word for me?" queried Lincoln.

"Yes," returned the doctor. "Weston was shot with a light caliber gun—a thirty-eight, and from the front." A little later Bradway asked the doctor to take him to see McKeever.

"This little gun I showed you belongs to him," said Lincoln. They went out. Williamson led Bradway upstairs in the Aldham hotel and, without the formality of knocking, pushed open the door to McKeever's room. Linc followed. McKeever sat propped up by pillows. A dark-visaged little man arose hastily as the two men entered.

"Howdy, Mac," said Williamson, then testily to the little man: "Sealover, I told you to stay away from my patient. You upset him."

Linc stepped from behind the portly doctor. "So this is Mr. Sealover. I've a

word with you, if you don't mind."

"Who're you?" demanded Sealover, warily.

"You know damn well who I am."

"Sealover, that's Bradway, the cowboy who shot me," spoke up McKeever.

"I've been looking for you," said Linc.

"You've found me," said the little man.

"I want an explanation of your part in the Haskell deal."

"What do you mean by the Haskell deal?"

"You got him over here to kill me, one way or another."

"I did no such thing. I told Haskell there was a cowboy over here who had won a pile of money. Haskell said that was just his meat."

"Haskell told me before he died that you came after him, and that Emery was behind it," said Lincoln.

"Well, he lied, that's all," returned Sealover.

"You're the one who's lying."

"Bradway, I'm not an armed man," protested Sealover.

"Listen, you skunk," said the cowboy. "Make sure you pack a gun next time you run into me."

Sealover, haggard and worried, hastily left the room.

"Here's your little gun, McKeever. It's not loaded, so don't make the mistake a second time," said Linc.

"I'm not liable to," replied the gambler. "Did you expect to find Sealover here? Or what brought you?"

"No. Meeting him was just some of my luck. I brought your gun back, and I wanted to apologize."

"To me!—For what?" asked McKeever, in amazement.

"I thought you might have killed my friend Weston with that little gun.

Found out you hadn't."

"I'm glad to say I didn't kill him."

"Do you know who did?"

"As a matter of fact I don't."

"Doc, you attend to your patient, and then please leave me alone with him for a few minutes."

"Well, I reckon that'll be all right, considering," returned the doctor.

Presently Dr. Williamson appeared ready to depart, but before he left he asked Lincoln not to excite his patient.

"McKeever, you tried to pull a gun on me and I shot you. I'm sure you won't try that again. So we are quits—if you want to leave it so."

"I'd prefer it to be quits."

"I figure you belong to Emery's outfit here, whatever it is. I'd like to ask you a few questions, in spite of that."

"Go ahead. But you'll be wasting your breath," replied McKeever.

"Is there any particular reason for you to be loyal to this coyote Emery?"

"None whatever. But a gambler's honor, you know."

"Is there any particular reason for you to be loyal to Kit Bandon?"

"Hell no! She made a fool of me," rejoined the gambler. "Same as she did of Lee, and other of his cattlemen friends, as she is doing to Emery, and will probably do to you."

"I find her an interesting woman, McKeever. Would you for a price tell me a few things about her?"

"No. Not for all the gold in South Pass."

"Are you afraid?"

"Men don't betray Kit Bandon—and live," returned the gambler.

"Which is equivalent to admitting there is something to betray," said Bradway, quickly. "Does your code of honor apply to Emery?"

"What do you want to know?" queried McKeever.

"His relation to Kit Bandon?"

"Ask her."

"I see. Do you know that Emery did not shoot Weston?"

"No!"

"Weston was shot by someone else!" flashed Lincoln.

"All I know is that Weston was shot by somebody for cheating at cards."

"Somebody! I'm looking for that somebody. That somebody hauled Weston to South Pass in a wagon—dead!"

It was a random shot, inspired by Bradway's suspicion that his friend might not have been killed in the *Leave It*. McKeever's astonishment was clear evidence that he knew Weston had not been murdered there.

"Who told you that?"

"That's my business."

"Bradway, I swear I don't know who killed Weston—or how it was done," protested McKeever, weakly, and it was obvious that he was telling the truth.

"I believe you that far," concluded Bradway.

Lincoln rose and left the room. Reaching the street, he crossed to the other side, making his way toward the rendezvous with Vince.

As they left the town behind, Linc told Vince of Doc Williamson's disclosure. "Then I went with Doc to see McKeever," continued Bradway. And he told of the meeting with Sealover, and the subsequent talk with the gambler.

"Pard, I picked up a speck of information while you were havin' yore seance with Sealover. I run into Bill Haynes," continued Vince. "Bill is a big hombre, broad as a wagon end, an' one-eyed. He hit it rich up at the diggin's, an' then bought cattle. His ranch

is about twelve miles down this creek. He's a friend of mine. He gave me what he said was good advice to rustle out of this neck of the woods."

"Why?"

"He didn't say. But I reckon there's something afoot thet'd make it healthier for me to leave."

"You been cutting your eyeteeth as a rustler?"

"How'd you guess it, pard?" queried Vince.

"Can they prove you rustled mavericks?"

"Ketched me red-handed, thet is, one rancher did."

"Why did he let you off?"

"The cattlemen haven't come to hangin' rustlers yet."

"Perhaps you'd better show this range your dust."

"Nope, I'm standin' by you, pard. Besides, I'm good an' sore."

"At whom?"

"Lee fired his foreman Thatcher."

"Thatcher? Fine type of cowboy," declared Lincoln.

"They don't come any better. Lee knows thet."

"Could it be that Thatcher side-stepped a little over some mavericks?"

"Lee fired Thatcher for refusin' to belong to that secret rider outfit he's organizin'."

"Are you sure of that?" out in Bradway.

"I could swear to it. Lee jest cain't raise no band of night-ridin' cowboys on this range."

"Lee struck me as a strong and resourceful cattleman. I'll bet he does raise that vigilante bunch."

"Anywhere else in Wyomin' mebbe, but shore not heah."

"Vince, do you realize what a hell of a statement that is?" demanded Linc.

"It's a hell of a country, pard," returned his comrade. "Tomorrer you're gonna see Luoy. Give her my love. I'll set tight an' have more to tell you when you come back. Good night."

Early next morning Lincoln went over to the merchandise store, where he purchased saddlebags, a rubber-lined blanket, and a small stock of supplies. At the livery stable he found his saddle, bridle, and a bag of grain, thoughtfully placed within easy reach by Vince. It was still early morning when Bradway took the trail west out of South Pass.

In due course he arrived at the rocky point with its fringe of dwarf pines where he was to meet Lucy. Dismounting behind the cover of the trees, he tethered Bay and set about collecting wood for his signal fire. He kindled it a few feet from the rim, throwing on several armfuls of green brush to make a smoke. Then he went to the spot where Lucy had shown him the valley of the Sweetwater. Several times he replenished the fire. Column after column of gray smoke he sent aloft in the signal agreed upon with Lucy. He wondered whether the girl had seen his signal fire from her aunt's ranch house below. Time passed. The noon-day hour was at hand. What could have detained Lucy? She had said positively that nothing could keep her from seeing him. Apparently something had. Suddenly Lincoln knew that she was not coming. Perhaps her aunt had found out. He shook his head hopelessly. Again he was up against that same blank wall that had confronted him ever since he had come to Wyoming. Lincoln extinguished the fire, and mounting Bay turned back toward the road.

Suddenly Bay's long ears shot up.

Lincoln's restraining hand prevented him from snorting. Then a rustle in a treetop to the right of him drew Lincoln's swift gaze. High up in a giant lone willow he espied a man with a leveled telescope pointed toward the sage in the direction of the Bandon ranch. Stepping aside from his horse Lincoln drew his gun and called out: "Hey you! up in the tree!—What the hell do you think you're doing?"

CHAPTER SIX

A Rank Poison Type Cowboy

THE man handling the spyglass was so startled by Lincoln's call that he all but lost his balance and fell out of the tree.

"Well, pile down out of there in a hurry! I might take you for a squirrel," ordered Lincoln.

The man came scrambling and sliding down the rough tree trunk. He approached Lincoln with hesitation, but after a moment with more confidence.

"Ain't you that cowboy, Bradway?" he queried.

"Never mind who I am. The thing is who are you?"

"My name's Bloom Burton. I have part interest in Jim Hargrove's cattle."

"And why aren't you so scared as you were, when you first saw me?"

"Hargrove told us you was *one* cowboy who'd be on our side."

"Our side! Who's your side?"

"Wal, we're the cattlemen of Sweetwater Valley."

"What were you doing up in that tree?"

"Did I look like I was pickin' flowers?" retorted Burton.

"You looked like a spy."

"I reckon that's what I was."

"On your own account? Or under orders?"

"Wal, I reckon I'd better say my own."

"Suppose I walk you over to Kit Bandon's and tell her what I caught you doing?" demanded Lincoln.

"My Gawd—don't do that, Bradway! She's packin' a gun and she can throw it. She'd kill me as quick as you could say 'maverick.'"

"If you'll do some talking I won't give you away."

"Say, I've already shot my mouth plenty—that is, about myself an' my pardners."

"What I want you to tell me is all you know about Jimmy Weston's death."

"I honestly don't know much, Bradway," returned the cattleman.

"Wasn't he murdered?"

"We ranchers reckon he was."

"Ranchers!—What do the cowboys think?"

"Nobody knows. They are close-mouthed as hell about that."

"Weston was killed out here on the range?" ventured Lincoln.

"Yes. He was drove to South Pass in the daid of night."

"From where?"

"Out heah in the valley someplace. A cowboy named Hank Miller was teamster for Hirsh, my neighbor down the valley. He hadn't been long heah. But he drove Hirsh's wagon to town that night—an' nobody never seen him again. The wagon was left in town, an' Weston's Stetson was found in it."

"Hank Miller?—Did you ever see him? Describe him."

"Strappin' cowboy. Young. Nice face an' sleepy eyes. He was seen in Rock Springs two days ago by Jeff Slocum,

driver of the eastbound stage. That news I got today—from a visitor I had. An' that's all I know positive about the Weston case."

"Thanks—Burton," returned Lincoln. "Tell your partner, Hargrove, that I'll be calling on him before long," said Lincoln, as he mounted.

"Shore, I'll tell him."

"Don't tell him I caught you in the act. That won't do any good. I can drop in to see him without sending word."

"Thanks, Bradway. That suits me plumb better," rejoined the other. "Are you ridin' right into Bandon an' her outfit?"

"Yes. I'm powerful interested in what's going on over there. So long, Burton," concluded Lincoln. "Hope to see you soon. And if you're friendly, don't worry about me."

"Well, I'm friendly, Bradway. So long. Them riders are bad medicine if you rile them. But they're Mormons an' chances are they'll be straight."

Presently Lincoln was close to a long white log cabin that stood out in the open. Boldly he rode into the grassy yard. He knocked on the door. There was no response. He repeated the knock, louder. No doubt Kit and her niece would be out with the roundup. Mounting Bay he rode out to where he could see the clouds of dust marking the roundup. Lincoln espied stray cattle all over the range, but did not catch sight of the main herd until he reached the ridge top. He was somewhat surprised to see perhaps two thousand head. As he approached, he detected four riders. They were circling the herd, cutting a large bunch of yearlings and calves out to one side.

By the time he was within five hundred yards, all the riders were together, three of them dismounted. He concen-

trated his attention upon the riders. They all packed guns; that he could see even at this distance. Leisurely riding up to them, the Nebraskan reined in Bay and slipped out of his saddle. "Howdy," he drawled.

"Howdy yourself," replied the nearest cowpoke, gruffly. Their attitude was one of intense curiosity, but little if any friendliness.

"Miss Bandon offered me a job," said Linc. "I rode out to see whether I'd like it or not."

"She's gone to Rock Springs with her niece, Lucy."

"When did they go?" he asked.

"They left on the morning stage."

"And when will they get back?"

"Not very soon. It'll take us several days to drive to Rock Springs."

"Cutting out a big bunch, I see. All yearlings and calves. Nearly five hundred head, if I know my cowboy business."

"There will be six hundred, if it's any of *your business*," returned the rider.

"Well, it's a hell of a lot of *my* business, if you want to know," flashed Lincoln. "Where did Kit Bandon get so many calves?"

"That's not *our* worry. We're hired to drive them to the railroad."

"You're all Mormons, I understand."

Their silence affirmed that assertion. "Even if you are Mormons you've no call to act so suspicious of a Gentile."

"We don't make friends over here, even with cowboys," returned the spokesman.

"Is it because you are just naturally hostile—or are you taking orders from Kit Bandon?"

That query seemed a shrewd guess, and though it was answered briefly in the negative, Linc could see that false-

hood was distasteful to this Mormon. He concluded that if there were anything shady in this deal the fault was the woman's responsibility.

"What's your name?" asked Lincoln.

"Luke Mathews."

"Hasn't it occurred to you to ask yourself *where* these calves and yearlings come from?"

"Yes, we've been curious, but it's none of our business."

"They were all mavericks and you burned that brand on them."

"No, we didn't. And we had no idea they were mavericks," declared Mathews.

"Well I'll be damned. Somebody branded those calves and its got the appearance of hurried bungling work, as you can see. Luke, have you ever heard them call Kit Bandon the Maverick Queen on this range?"

"No. We never heard that."

"Well, that would seem to let you out. But take a hunch from a Nebraska cowman who knows tricks of the range you Mormons never heard of. Make this your last drive!"

With these words Linc stepped astride his horse and turned back toward the ranch. "If they tell Kit Bandon, she'll scalp me alive. But hell! What else could I do? I have to find out whether they were in this thing with the Maverick Queen."

Reaching the corrals, the Nebraskan deliberately rode around inspecting them. Presently, down a lane between two fences of peeled poles, and hidden behind the long shed, he found what he had hoped to find. A smaller corral had been built against the back of the shed. It was empty, so far as livestock was concerned. In a corner he found a neatly stacked pile of wood, carefully split into small pieces. With such wood

a cowboy could kindle a hot fire in a few minutes! Under the eaves of the shed was a shelf upon which lay branding tools. Lincoln espied the remains of little fires scattered all over the ground in the little corral. He dismounted to examine the heaps of ashes. One of them had been built within the last forty-eight hours.

Here again, however, was nothing that constituted damning evidence against Kit Bandon. Many ranchers branded calves in corrals instead of on the open range. Yet in Linc's mind's eye he envisioned a cowboy riding into that corral in the dead of night, dragging or packing a maverick, quickly building a little fire and hurriedly heating an iron to burn a brand.

Having learned everything it was possible to discover for the time being, Linc headed Bay back on the road toward South Pass. Lincoln's thoughts revolved around his plan to take the stage next day for Rock Springs and find Lucy Bandon if he could not locate the man whom Burton had called Hank Miller.

When the westbound stage rolled out of South Pass Lincoln was on the seat with the driver, an ex-teamster named Slocum. Before starting, Slocum deliberately looked the Nebraskan over to make his own estimate.

"Bradway, I've heerd what you done to them fourflushers in South Pass. Son, you're lookin' for someone."

"Did you happen to see Hank Miller in Rock Springs?"

"I shore did. He interest you?"

"Yes, he does a little."

"Somethin' agin him?"

"I've never seen the man. I haven't a thing against him—that I can prove. All the same I'll kill him if he doesn't come clean with how and why he haul-

ed my dead friend from somewhere in the valley to Emery's joint in South Pass."

Slocum slapped his long reins and urged his four horses to a somewhat brisker trot. "Three days ago Hank Miller came to me in Rock Springs," said Slocum. "He'd been soakin' up considerable red likker. An' he looked mighty mean. He asked me if Kit Bandon had come on my stage. I told him no. An' he bit out: 'You tell her when you git back to the Pass thet by Gawd she'd better meet me hyar pronto, as she agreed!'"

Rock Springs appeared to be much more of a town than South Pass. It was an important station on the Union Pacific Railroad, and the center of a soft-coal mining district. As such, it seemed to have the orderliness and stability of a permanent town.

The Elk Hotel was a large frame building facing the railroad station. He went in to inquire if the Misses Bandon were registered there. The clerk replied in the affirmative. He had a room assigned to him and then asked where he could find the best clothing store in town. Lincoln purchased a suit of rather extreme cut that fit him as though it had been tailored for him.

The Bandons would stay in Rock Springs until the herd of young cattle arrived. Kit Bandon would sell or ship by railroad before leaving town. Leisurely Lincoln bathed and shaved, and arrayed himself in his handsome new outfit. The big guns belted on bulged the frock coat a little at the hips. He made sure that they could be drawn quickly in case of need. Then Bradway left the room to go downstairs. The lobby appeared to be noisy and active with people; loud voices and the clink of glasses came from a bar near at

hand. He could look through the parlor into the dining room, where guests were entering. A cowboy slouched into the lobby. He answered the description given Lincoln by Bloom Burton, except that his actual presence bore a vitality and a cool demeanor that Lincoln had learned to associate with cowboys of the hard and reckless school. He packed a gun and wore it low. Lincoln did not get a full look at his face. The cowboy was looking for someone with an impatience and boldness that kept him on the move. Linc had a pretty good hunch that it was Hank Miller, and that he was here to meet the Bandons. The Nebraskan kept his eye on the lobby where Kit Bandon and Lucy would have to enter from the floor above, and he had scarcely returned to his point of vantage when they appeared. Lucy was holding her aunt's arm, evidently trying to detain her. But Kit descended, step by step, until Lincoln could see her searching the lobby. The two women had dressed for dinner. The Nebraskan's gaze devoured the slim girl, attractively clad in blue. But she was only a pale shadow beside the colorful Kit. They paused under the bright cluster of oil lamps. Linc watched them with intense curiosity, restraining his eagerness to approach. Lucy had not ceased her importunities. Her aunt's beautiful face, too, wore a troubled look. Without her smile, the play of her features, and her customary animation, she appeared older. At that moment the cowboy put in an appearance.

He approached the trio. Kit's attention was on the cowboy, whose back was turned to Linc. But as the Nebraskan drew close Lucy recognized him. Suddenly she gave a violent start and turned pale. Then the Nebraskan

spoke to Kit. "Miss Bandon, here I am, late, I'm sorry to say." Kit wheeled at the sound of a voice that was familiar.

"Linc Bradway!" she cried. "You followed me? Oh, you dear boy! Lucy, this is the cowboy friend I told you about—Linc Bradway. It appears he is also a gambler and actor. Lord only knows what else!"

She acknowledged the introduction with a slight bow and averted glance.

"Linc, this is a cowboy friend of ours—Hank Miller," went on Kit, happily. Miller did not offer his hand. If he had done so Linc would have ignored it. "How do, Mr. Bradway. Reckon I wouldn't take you for a cowboy," he drawled.

"Howdy, Hank Miller," retorted Lincoln. "Same for me. I'd take you for a teamster."

"Teamster?" echoed Miller.

"Sure. *Teamster*, you know. A hombre who drives wagons!" As he spoke Lincoln disengaged his arm from Kit's, and stepped aside. This man was no unknown quantity to him. Miller was the rank poison type of cowboy. His tanned face blazed scarlet. "Bradway, thet crack calls for an explanation," he muttered.

"Aw, you don't have to be told in kindergarten language. You're a bright fellow." He had rubbed Miller the wrong way, on a raw spot.

"Say, you jealous roosters!" broke in Kit Bandon. "Don't make us a scene here in the hotel. Have you no manners?" And she grasped Miller's arm and held on to it.

Bradway eased his posture and said: "Sorry, ladies; I guess your friend didn't like my remark. I'm a careless person. Miller, I apologize."

"Well, you can go to hell!"

"Thanks. There's a pretty fair possi-

bility that you will beat me there."

"Hank, cut it!" flashed Kit. "Lino, will you join us at dinner?"

"Delighted, provided the dinner is on me," he replied.

"Lucy, take charge of him, and for heaven's sake keep him quiet," ordered Kit, leading Miller off toward the dining-room.

"For God's sake, don't believe anything she told you!" said Linc.

"You hypocrite!" whispered Lucy.

"Lucy, I beg of you—" protested Lincoln.

"You handsome flash gambler! Cowboy?" She let out a trill of laughter, cold as ice. "Jimmy Weston was a liar! I was crazy to believe a word he said!"

"Certainly you were. And I ought to have my head examined for falling in love with you!" Linc's quick retort ended Lucy's defiance. She led them into a corner of the dining-room, where a table had been reserved. When Kit designated where they were to sit Lincoln said apologetically: "Miss Bandon, would you mind if I sat where I could face the room?" And he moved to the chair in the corner. Kit sat down to his right and Lucy to his left. Miller laughed. "I'm not afraid to turn my back on anyone. No one's looking' for me!"

"Miller, I venture to guess you are mistaken," said Lincoln.

This exchange of words angered Kit.

"Can't you two gamecocks be gentlemen long enough for us to eat? After dinner, if you must keep picking at each other go out into the street."

"Wal, that suits me. I'm pretty hungry," rejoined Miller, and he smiled at Lucy. His presence, minus the insolent tone and look, was singularly attractive.

"Miss Bandon, do they serve cham-

pagne in this two-bit burg?" asked the Nebraskan.

"Indeed they do," replied Kit, beaming upon him. "I have already ordered dinner for us. But you can order the champagne." With the ordering of dinner and wine the situation eased.

"You were expecting someone to meet you in the lobby?" he inquired in a casual tone.

"Yes. I had an appointment—about a deal for cattle," she returned, evasively.

"Your herd will be in tomorrow, I hear," continued the Nebraskan.

"How do you know that?" asked Kit.

"I rode out to your ranch day before yesterday. Your Mormon riders were about ready to start the drive."

"You interest yourself a good deal in other people's business?" she retorted, in a tone she had never before used with him. Quickly she tried to conceal her perturbation behind a gay laugh. The serving of dinner interrupted conversation. The champagne, apparently, had cheered Kit out of her distraught mood. She reached forward to pat Linc's hand where it rested on the table just as a bellboy brought her a note. He watched her read it, and saw her brow become clouded.

"Hank, our—my party is waiting outside," she said. "Lino, we must leave you for a little while. I'm sorry, but it's important. Where will you wait?"

"There's some champagne left," drawled Lino. "Perhaps I can persuade Lucy to have another glass."

"No, not here," Kit replied, hastily. She seemed to be thinking swiftly. Lincoln grasped that she did not want him or Lucy to see the person she and Miller were to meet. "Come, Hank, we must go. There's a parlor at the head of the stairs. Wait there for us. We shouldn't be long."

"Don't hurry on our account," rejoined Lincoln.

"I get you, Bradway," retorted the cowboy. He turned to Kit, who had arisen from the table. "You go meet that feller. I'll stay here."

"You fool!" snapped Kit. "You come with me." She seized his arm and almost dragged him away, turning once to beckon Lucy and Lincoln. They followed, with Lincoln a little behind the girl. This was his chance and he could hardly contain himself. Lincoln led Lucy up the wide stairway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Secret

LINC turned to the curtained doorway and peered inside. He flung the curtains aside and "Come," he said. It was an invitation, not a command.

She was reluctant to enter but finally brushed past him without looking up and walked across the room to one of the open windows. Lincoln slowly followed, going to the opposite window and looking out into the night. Lincoln stepped back from the window and said: "Lucy, we have only a few minutes to talk, and I for one don't want to take all this valuable time quarreling with you about what someone has told you about me."

"What someone told me!" she retorted.

"That's what I said," he replied. "Kit Bandon has told you something about me. Will you tell me what it was?"

"It was too sickening for me to repeat."

"Well, it isn't true, whatever she might have said. I believe there must have been some other reason prompt-

ing her besides merely wanting to collect another cowboy's scalp."

"Please stop," whispered Lucy.

"That's only because you are thinking wrong."

"How could I be thinking wrong—you admit it."

"Whatever she may have told you, Lucy, this is God's truth. She called me up to her parlor in the *Leave It* to warn me. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. That's all that happened, Lucy, I swear it."

"You're just another slick-tongued cowboy trying to make game of me—like they all do."

"Don't insult me, Lucy," he said bitterly. "I know this looks bad to you, but for God's sake try to trust me. It's tremendously important for both of us!"

"You're just like all the rest of them. I hate cowboys. All of them lost their heads over my aunt. That wouldn't have been so bad but they—"

She bit her lip, evidently realizing what she was about to betray, and for a moment she was pale and silent.

"Please believe me—trust me, Lucy," he said, simply. "The honest truth, Lucy, is that I fell in love with you at first sight and every moment since I've loved you more."

"I—I don't believe you," she murmured.

Instead of shaking her again he pulled her into his arms and held her close.

"Let me go!" she cried, furiously.

"Not until you come to your senses."

"You not only are a liar but a brute! Suppose my aunt should come and see you now?"

"Lucy, I give you my word, I'm not afraid of it."

"She would kill you!"

"Oh, she would?" he queried, sharply.

"I'm not so easy to kill. I am mighty interested in this aunt of yours. And my interest has nothing to do with her charm or magnetic personality. Lucy, you will have to take me on trust just as I seem to have to take a great deal on trust."

"I won't do it."

He crushed her in his arms and pulled her face close to his. Then he released her and she stood facing him silently. With a quick movement she turned her back toward him and with nervous fingers began fumbling with her disheveled hair.

"I wouldn't kiss a girl who could think me as low-down as you do, even when I'm mad about her . . . So forget that for the time being. What mainly brought me here was to meet Hank Miller."

A look of dread came into the girl's blue eyes.

"You've heard of something concerning Jimmy?"

"That is true, Lucy. However, I didn't expect to find him such a tough hombre. He would have been a bad customer to meet anyhow but he seems to have some claim on you and that's going to make it worse."

"But he hasn't any claim on me," she denied vehemently. Then again she closed her lips tightly. She turned away to the window again and pressed her face and hands against the pane.

"Don't you *want* to believe in me, Lucy?" he implored.

"More than anything in the world," she answered.

"All right, I can prove to you that what I said is true."

"Words are cheap. You could make black look white," she said.

"I will marry you right this hour if you'll have me."

She turned to him, incredulous, as if she had not heard right.

"Lucy," he went on, "up there on the Pass you led me to think that perhaps you could love me. I'm no different now than I was that day I met you. Won't you believe that?"

"I can conceive of such a thing but the idea of marrying you is preposterous—mad. It isn't possible."

"It might be," he pleaded. "This town is big enough to have a parson. Let me go out and see?"

"No. You're mad."

"I may be mad, but I love you. And I think that's the way to save us both."

"It wouldn't save us," she cried, wildly. "She'd kill us both! I didn't tell you before because I was afraid to, but Kit is truly and sincerely in love with you. She is counting upon marrying you. And when she makes up her mind to something, nothing can stand in her way."

He seized her hands and drew her to him. "Lucy, that sweet and beautiful love you had for me couldn't have died in a moment, could it?"

"I tried to destroy it but I couldn't. It has tortured me—"

His lips closing on hers halted the sentence. He felt her trembling.

"Let me go," she pleaded.

"No, Lucy darling, I'll never let you go now." He kissed her again.

"Please, Lincoln—this is madness."

"Say you will marry me." He crushed her in his arms. Her eyes were opened wide now and staring up into his. Her head fell forward then on his breast. She had yielded. "I swear to you, my darling, that never as long as you live, will you regret this moment."

"Oh, Lincoln, hurry before I lose my courage," she cried.

He rushed out of the room and half-

way down the stairway. Then reason and caution returned to him and he made his way down the rest of the stairs and through the lobby. Kit Bandon and her companions were nowhere in sight. Lincoln went out. At the next corner he crossed the street, and entering a store he inquired if there were a parson in Rock Springs. He was informed that there was a Reverend Smith who was on his way to Oregon and who temporarily was holding meetings at the church right next to the depot. The church door was open, a small oil lantern flickering over the entrance. Lincoln caught the strains of an organ: evidently it was nearly time for some kind of service. His knock was answered by a boy who informed the hard-breathing cowboy that the preacher lived in the small frame house next door. A little round-faced, smiling man wearing the black garb of a churchman, greeted Lincoln with a smile.

"Are you the minister?" Lincoln managed to blurt out.

"I am, my good sir. What can I do for you?"

"I want to get married," panted Lincoln.

"Well, where's the bride?" inquired the minister.

"I can get her here in five minutes. What will I have to have?"

"A ring and the lady's consent. I can supply everything else."

"I'll be back in five minutes."

Lincoln rushed back the way he had come. Happening to pass a shop with a tray of jewelry in the window Lincoln dashed in breathlessly and purchased a diamond ring and a wedding ring that would go on his little finger. "So far, so good," he whispered. Then, for the first time, as he neared the hotel he slowed

down. A quick glance showed that the Maverick Queen and her visitors still were absent from the lobby. He bounded up the stairway three steps at a time and burst into the parlor. He kissed Lucy and pressed her hand reassuringly. Then he led her out of the room and down the stairs.

"Don't look back, Lucy. Thank God I had the courage to ask you. And that you found the trust to come with me."

At Lincoln's knock the minister appeared and quietly asked them in.

"Well, you made it in less than five minutes," said the parson. "This is my wife," he continued, indicating the woman standing near.

She replied, "I am very happy to meet you."

"What is your name?" asked the parson.

"Lincoln Bradway."

"And the lady's name?"

"Lucy Bandon," faltered Lucy.

"Well, if you're in such a great hurry, we might as well get it over," said the parson producing his worn Bible.

As if in a trance Lincoln listened and made answers that he could scarcely hear. Lucy's voice likewise was almost inaudible. The cowboy's hands trembled so he could hardly slip the little ring on her finger. Then, in a moment it was all over and they were signing their names.

The cowboy's heart was full to overflowing as he kissed her. The minister's wife congratulated them and also kissed Lucy. Linc pulled himself together.

The miraculous had happened. He brought out his wallet and presented a hundred dollar bill to the parson. "You have made me the happiest and most fortunate man in the world," he said earnestly.

The minister's eyes grew round when he saw the greenback.

"Would it be asking you too much to keep this secret a little while?"

"Oh, please do," implored Lucy. "I—we—it would be best for us that it should not be known at once."

"Why, not at all," replied the minister heartily. "I've been out west long enough to know that the main thing when you marry young folks is not to worry about the particulars."

"I forgot something, Lucy," he said, smiling, as he produced a diamond ring which burned white and gold in the lamp light. He put it on Lucy's finger alongside her wedding ring.

They hurried out of the light into the darkness again and crossed the street. This time it was Lucy who was almost running as she clutched her husband's arm.

"Darling," he remonstrated. "What's the big rush? We're married. No one can stop us now!"

"Oh, Lincoln, I'm so glad that you took the bit in your teeth, and made me marry you. I'm terribly happy and frightened, too. But we can't let them know yet!"

"Not at this time!" agreed Lincoln.

They went up the steps and into the lobby. It was aglow with light, and filled with noise and cigar smoke. The Nebraskan's keen eyes swiftly covered the men inside focusing finally upon Hank Miller.

"There's Miller," whispered Lincoln. "He sees us, he's coming. Lucy, keep up your courage."

She showed surprising coolness, he thought; and she replied to his warning in a perfectly controlled voice by asking him if he had seen her aunt anywhere.

Bradway said, "No, she doesn't seem to be back yet."

Then Miller stood before them. His face was dark with anger and suspicion, and he showed signs of having been drinking steadily since dinner. He reached for one of Lucy's arms and jerked her rudely away from Lino's side.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snarled.

Lucy drew back from him, but there was no fear in her manner.

"Hank, let go of my arm. You're hurting me."

"Where have you been?" he repeated.

"We've been out for a walk. We got tired waiting. I asked Mr. Bradway to go."

"Oh, you did, huh? I wouldn't put that beyond you and more besides."

Then Miller's gaze drifted toward Lucy's escort. As he met Miller's eyes, a curious little cold stillness came over Lincoln. He knew then, beyond any further doubt, that he was going to have to kill this man.

"Where is Miss Bandon?" he asked.

"She's in there driving a hard bargain with that cattleman. So, Bradway, you got away with it."

"With what?"

"Making a play for my girl. I saw it in your eyes."

"Yes. Well, all's fair in love and war, Miller," retorted Lincoln. "Lucy, you goupstairs," he said.

Miller added to that: "Yes, you damn little she-cat, get out of here, now. But I'll see you later."

"Miller, that isn't a very gentlemanly way to address a lady," drawled Lincoln. "Much less the one you claim to honor with your regard."

Lucy gave them both a quick look and turning, she hurriedly mounted

the stairway without a backward look.

"The hell you say!" exploded Miller.

"Miller, it might interest you to know that I came to Rock Springs to find you."

"Is that so? Now, you've found me, what are you going to do about it?"

"First off I'm going to take up that little matter of you calling Lucy names. I should have done it then," said Linc.

"You'll find it a bigger bite than maybe you can chew."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the Nebraskan.

"All right, Mister Bradway. What do you propose to do?"

"*This!*"

With action as swift as the word, Lincoln swung his right arm in a haymaker that landed on Miller's mouth with terrific force, knocking him over backward. For an instant he strove to recover his balance, then fell over some vacant chairs and slipped to the floor where he lay still.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fatal Meeting

THE crash of falling chairs and the thud of Miller's body landing on the floor brought from those near by in the lobby excited exclamations followed by silence. Lincoln waited to see if Miller was going to rise, but evidently he was stunned. He lay sprawled on the floor, his head and shoulders up against the wainscoting. A tall, sallow man with a drooping mustache and sharp eyes stepped forward from the crowd and said to Bradway, "Wal, young man, you hit him pretty hard."

Linc turned. Prominent on the newcomer's vest was a silver badge.

"Yes, Sheriff, I hit him all right," he replied, grimly.

"What was it for?"

"He insulted a young lady who just came in with me."

"I saw her, the young Bandon girl. In that case I reckon I won't do anything but offer you some advice."

"I'd like that pretty pronto," replied the Nebraskan.

"Do you know the man you've hit?"

"Saw him and met him tonight at dinner, but I don't know anything about him except that he's mean. I'm afraid I'm in for it."

"You sure are," drawled the sheriff. "Miller hails from Calispel. I met cattlemen who knew him in Montana where he had a hard name. Hot-headed and quick on the draw."

The crowd of bystanders began to open up a passage to let Kit Bandon come hurriedly through. Her mysterious black eyes took in Lincoln with the sheriff, then the prostrate Miller as she approached.

"Sheriff," he whispered, "arrest me or take me in charge."

"I savvy," muttered the law man, and he laid a hand on Lincoln's arm.

Kit Bandon now stood before them, her dark eyes smoldering.

"Linc Bradway, how come you are down here? Where's Lucy? What have you and Hank been up to?"

"Lucy grew tired of waiting and asked me to take her for a little walk," replied Lincoln. "When we came in again Miller was here and he tried to take the girl's arm. Lucy jerked away from him. They had a few words, then Miller turned to me. I told Lucy to go upstairs, then Miller insulted her. We exchanged a few words after that and then I hit him."

"Insulted Lucy?" she exclaimed. "He hasn't any claim on Lucy. Why did you want to dirty your hands with him? Why didn't you throw your gun on him?"

"I did think of it but here in the crowded lobby—"

"You'll have to do it anyhow now," flashed Kit. "Miller told me he was going to badger you into a fight."

"Come with me, young feller. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say," replied Linc. "But it's Lincoln Bradway."

"Sheriff, are you going to run him in?" Kit queried sharply.

"No, I reckon I won't do that, but I'll get him out of here. There's likely to be a rumpus when Miller comes to."

"Sheriff, that is ridiculous. I'll take care of him."

"Sorry, Miss Bandon, but I'll take him along."

He led Bradway toward the door. Miller had begun to show signs of recovering consciousness. One of the men approached and knelt beside him. Kit Bandon went over to stare angrily down at the recumbent cowboy. As Linc backed out the door, he could see over the heads of the crowd Lucy standing white-faced and anxious-eyed on the stairway.

Outside the sheriff led the Nebraskan down the lighted street.

"Reckon you'd like a drink?" suggested the sheriff.

"I would, but I've sworn off."

"That's never a bad idea. Bradway, I don't take you for an out-and-out gambler. You haven't the look."

"No, I'm not," said Lincoln. "My cowboy clothes are old and soiled and I wanted to buy something fancier, and this rig was all I could find here in town."

"Wanted to impress the ladies?" drawled the Texan.

"Well, yes, one of them."

"Bradway, I know this Bandon woman pretty well, and I met the niece several times. She's a mighty sweet little filly. Excuse me for being curious, but is it Kit or Lucy you're sweet on?"

"Sheriff, I don't suppose you'll believe it but it is only Lucy."

"It's hard to savvy at that, which ain't saying that Lucy Bandon is not a sweet and pretty girl. But that aunt of hers makes every girl pale in front of her. I'd like to ask you some more about them ladies, Bradway, and what they're doin' here in Rock Springs, but that's enough for the present."

"Please hold it confidential, Sheriff," replied Lincoln.

"Young feller, I don't suppose it will do the least bit of good but I advise you to get out of Rock Springs tonight."

"Sheriff, I can't run away from any man, let alone a hombre like Miller."

"Then you'll have to meet him tomorrow. And if I know hard customers you'll have to shoot mighty quick and mighty straight. I thought perhaps you wouldn't want to mess up things while the ladies are in town."

"You heard Kit Bandon. She'd like to see me throw a gun on Miller."

"I didn't miss that," quickly replied the Texan. "I'll take you to a little hotel down this street. You go to your room and tomorrow stay inside until I come down and tip you off how the land lies."

"You will do that, Sheriff?" asked Lincoln.

"Glad to. It wouldn't do any good much to arrest Miller tonight. I couldn't hold him and so long as you intend to stay in town I think a meeting can't be

avoided. I hope it will be *you* I'll have to arrest afterward."

"You can bet on that, Sheriff."

He halted Bradway in the middle of the next block. They entered a quiet hotel where the sheriff made arrangements for Lincoln's lodgings. The Nebraskan was shown to his room on the first floor, and after bolting the door and pulling down the blind he sat down on the bed to think over all the things that had happened during this most eventful evening of his life.



He slept rather late, remaining in bed until the sun was high. He dressed slowly and went out for his breakfast in the small dining room connected with the hotel. The slowness of the service suited Lincoln's plans. During the meal he occupied himself with a newspaper from behind which he occasionally peered when he heard a footstep. He made a leisurely meal of it. Several other customers came in but paid no attention to him. At ten o'clock sharp Sheriff Haught entered and immediately approached the lounging Nebraskan.

"Mawnin', cowboy," said the Texan cheerfully, as he seated himself.

"Howdy, Sheriff. I was afraid you weren't going to show up."

"Wal, the stage is all set."

"Yes? Then you've seen Miller."

"That's the truth."

"Is he rarin' around town looking for me?"

"That's how I figured, but it didn't

turn out that way. Miller is at the hotel, clean-shaven, sober as ice, and none the worse for wear. I had the luck to see him with Kit Bandon just a little while ago. They were havin' a hot argument. My hunch is that Bandon was not persuadin' him to avoid you. It might have been the other way round. I stopped on the stairway to light a cigar and stayed there as long as I dared hopin' to hear somethin' interestin'. Later I passed Miller in the lobby. He was as het up as a wild stallion at the sight of his first rope. I saw him pace up and down the lobby and every little bit go out into the street. He's lookin' for you, or my name ain't Haught."

"Then he won't have to wait long," replied Lincoln, curtly rising from the table. "Sheriff, I'm mightily obliged to you."

"Not at all. All I want is for you to have an even break. Now you walk up on the other side of the street and keep your eyes peeled. I'll be hangin' around that hotel corner and if there's any need to give you a tip I'll do it. Wait a few minutes after I've gone and then you follow. I don't have to tell you what you're up against."

The sheriff turned on his heel and left the dining-room. Lincoln ordered another cup of coffee but did not drink it. Presently he rose and went out. It was a beautiful sunny morning, clear and crisp; many people already were about; several wagons creaked down the street between groups of mounted horsemen. There were several loungers standing outside of the hotel and Lincoln could see that the lobby was filled with people. Something drew his gaze up to an open window in the second story of the hotel. Standing back from the opening he could see Kit Ban-

don, tense and expectant, her dark eyes fixed on the street below. Quickly Bradway lowered his eyes to the sidewalk. At that moment Miller emerged from the hotel. His advent was a signal for several men to bolt from the building by a side entrance. Evidently Miller had spied Lincoln from inside the hotel.

Holding his hands low and away from his hips, the cowboy slowly descended the steps and continued even more deliberately across the street. With a slight movement with his right hand he motioned Linc off the sidewalk. This slight action and the way Miller wore his gun convinced the Nebraskan that he was left-handed. Dropping his coat over a railing Lincoln edged sideways into the street facing the cowboy. Miller was cautious, yet bold: evidently he was not going to make a hasty issue of this meeting. He appeared to be as curious about the situation as Lincoln.

They were still the width of the side street apart. Warily they crossed the dusty street almost as far as the railroad park. Miller was the first to stop. Lincoln immediately halted in his tracks. The two men were about twenty steps apart. Linc welcomed the chance for a close scrutiny of his antagonist's face.

"The deal's on, cowboy," said Miller in a voice that sounded strained and high-pitched, "but I'm sure curious. Where are you from?"

"Nebraska. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not a damn thing," flashed Miller. "... You another one of this woman's maverick hunters?"

"Not on your life," retorted Lincoln.

"She told me you were."

"She lied."

"She said she was going to marry you."

"I can't help what she thinks. Maybe she doesn't know that I've got a wife."

"Makin' up to Kit—playin' with Lucy—and all the time you're married?"

"It might look like that but you're wrong. That all you want to say to me?"

"I don't savvy your game."

"You will pronto."

Miller betrayed an intense anger that could have been inspired and inflamed only by the Bandon woman.

But despite the anger and violent emotion that blazed in the cowboy's face, Linc could see that Miller was consumed with an intense curiosity. And he recognized that this was the moment: the advantage was his. He could break this hard cowboy's nerve. Quickly he said, "Kit couldn't have meant what she doesn't know—that *Lucy is my wife!*"

For an instant Miller seemed incapable of speech. Then he roared hoarsely, "I don't believe it!" He forgot completely that he had challenged a man to a gun duel. He shook his head bewilderedly. He turned back to look at the hotel. Then he muttered:

"That accounts for it. Lucy didn't act like herself. But, hell, stranger, Kit Bandon said—"

"Wrong, Miller," interrupted Linc. "That is not what Kit Bandon meant."

"Hell's fire, man, what else?"

"I'm Jimmy Weston's friend. That's what brought me to Wyoming."

"Wha-at! The hell you say!"

"I know, Miller, that you hauled him away from Kit Bandon's ranch alive or dead."

"Not alive—*dead!*" burst out Miller as he jerked for his gun.

Lincoln saw over the spouting flame

of his own weapon the belching red of Miller's but the Nebraskan's bullet reached its mark a fraction of a second before Miller's. Then a stunning blow high up on his body staggered Lincoln; a searing pain ran through his shoulder.

Miller's gun dropped and his lax arm fell to his side. A blank look slowly spread over the face which a moment before had worn a grimace of bitter hatred, and he fell face forward to lie still on the hard-packed dirt of the street.

Lincoln took several steps toward the fallen man waiting for some sign of movement. There was none. He heard loud voices and the footsteps of running men; then suddenly dizzy and blind he wavered to his knees, but he did not fall or lose consciousness. He heard a woman's piercing scream; then someone laid hands upon him and helped him to his feet. As his mind cleared momentarily he saw that Sheriff Haught was supporting him.

"Are you bad hurt, Bradway?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't—know. I guess not," replied Lincoln, haltingly.

The sheriff took his gun. There were men bending over Miller who manifestly was stone dead.

"Where did he hit you?" asked the sheriff.

"Somewhere—high up."

"Do you taste any blood?"

"No, I don't."

"Here, let's see," said Haught, tearing at Lincoln's shirt.

"Not bad. Too high to catch the lung," he said with relief.

The sheriff folded a scarf and placed it on Lincoln's shoulder.

"It was a narrow shave, Bradway.

Here, somebody help me with him," he said to the bystanders.

A citizen came to the other side of Linc and supported him. A third followed with the wounded man's coat. They walked, half carrying him across the street. At that instant Kit Bandon came running down the steps, lips parted, her eyes wide and dark, her face expressing fear and concern. She stopped before the trio and looked searchingly into Bradway's drawn face.

"Is—is it bad, Lincoln?" she whispered huskily.

"It's—it's—nothing," he replied faintly.

"Miss Bandon, he's all right," said the sheriff. "I'll take him down to my place and call the doctor."

She moved along with him and the crowd followed. In some way she had been able to get hold of one of his hands. By the time they had gone half a block or more Lincoln began to feel that consciousness was slipping away from him. Before everything went completely black, he felt himself being lifted and carried.

When he recovered consciousness he found himself on a couch in a stone-walled room with barred windows. Someone was working over him. He smelled strong antiseptics. Kit sat on the other side of the bed watching him anxiously.

"How is it, Doc?" he heard Haught ask.

"Clean as a whistle," replied the doctor. "Went clear through. Never touched the collar bone."

Kit stood up and laid her cool hand on the wounded man's forehead. "Are you in much pain?" she asked.

Linc shook his head. His eyes seemed to be searching the room for someone.

"Where's Lucy?" he whispered.

Kit Bandon did not reply.

"Now, Kit," said the sheriff. "He's all right . . . Mustn't be excited. I think you had better leave him with me. My housekeeper and I will take turns keeping watch over him."

"Of course I will go," said the Bandon woman, "but you must keep me posted on how he is."

She bent over the Nebraskan and kissed him on the forehead. "You're all right, Linc. Lie still and bear it." Then she hurried out.

The doctor rose and went into a little anteroom where Linc could hear him washing his hands in a sink.

He returned to pick up his coat and put it on, then packed his instruments and medicines. Sheriff Haught stood looking down upon the cowboy with a smile.

"I sure was scared, Bradway. Must be gettin' chicken-hearted about gunfire. I've seen a deal of fightin', but there was somethin' different about this—must have been the women . . . Miller was one mean hombre. If I'd known how fast you were with a gun I wouldn't have been as concerned. Curious about him, Bradway?"

Lincoln shook his head faintly. He fastened somber eyes upon the sheriff.

"You beat him to it, but not very much. Your bullet took him right in the center of the left vest pocket and it was a right good job. All the same I had to arrest you."

"Then I'm — in jail?" asked Lincoln.

"Sure are, but we'll call it a hospital."

"Could—could I send a message to my —to Miss Bandon at the hotel?" he asked.

His eyes fell shut and he could not distinguish what the sheriff was saying. Presently he slipped into a stupor. When he awakened after a while, he

became aware of a throbbing pain. He heard footsteps now and then and low voices.

The Nebraskan had been wounded more than once and a good deal more seriously than this. The pain and the feverishness were not unbearable, but what he dreaded was that grim black reaction that inevitably followed taking a man's life in anger. He forced his thoughts from the realization that he had killed a man. How would Lucy feel? Once she had called him a killer. Why did Lucy not come to see him? Kit had come. Was Kit keeping his wife from coming? At last, toward dawn, he fell asleep and when he awoke the sun was shining through the barred window. He felt much better, except for the throbbing in his shoulder. He did not have a fever. When Haught returned he said, "Good morning."

The sheriff replied cheerfully telling him that he had made a good night of it and that there was little to worry about.

"Sheriff, don't let anybody see me today, not even—not even Miss Bandon. I can get up and move around if I have to. I don't want anything but cold water."

"I know how you feel, Bradway. I've shot some bad hombres myself in my day."

"You're a peculiar sheriff," whispered Lincoln with a wan smile.

"Thet is kind of funny considerin' I've run you in and have to keep you here for a while."

"I'd rather be here than anywhere else, just now. But why do you have to keep me? It was an even draw."

"I'll tell you in good time. I don't want to get you excited."

"That woman!"

"Which one?" said the sheriff quizzically.

"Kit Bandon, of course. I've a hunch she wants me kept in here. Well, I'm glad—Sheriff, will you go to the hotel and bring back my bag and clothes?"

"What'll I tell the women?" asked the sheriff.

"Tell Kit I'm terribly bad, but when you see Lucy tell her the truth."

He stamped out noisily and in an hour or so returned with the cowboy's belongings. This time he moved quietly and left without speaking. Linc heard the key grate in the lock.

Bradway pulled himself upright to attempt walking around the room. A throbbing pain seared his shoulder and left him dizzy. But if necessary, he could have mounted a horse and ridden away. He paced the room, lay down again only to come to his feet restlessly and move around once more. There were blinds over the windows which he pulled down to keep out the glare of daylight. Then he made no further effort to avoid the ghastly reaction. He settled down to a grim and dark fight. The day passed with the spell hard upon him; when night had fallen he was gradually recovering from its somber grip and eventually he was able to sleep again.

Next morning Lincoln was himself again. The bullet wound still made him twinge, but his mind was at peace once more. He shaved himself and donned a clean white shirt, but since he could not leave the prison he went back to bed. Marie stolidly brought him breakfast from the hotel, the meal being accompanied by flowers. Lincoln had a fair idea who sent them.

The prisoner had scarcely finished his breakfast when Sheriff Haught entered with the doctor and Kit Bandon.

She was dressed in white and appeared as gay as the flowers she admitted having sent him. The doctor's examination was brief. At its conclusion he said, "Sheriff, you can let him out of here today."

"Oh no, I can't. He's under arrest."

"Well," said the doctor, "my work is done. Young man, when they release you come and see me."

"Thank you, doctor. I'll be coming pronto."

Kit sat down on the bed beside him, and began stroking his forehead with a soft hand.

"You look fine, Lincoln. All clean-shaven and white-shirted! You must have expected—someone. Are you in any pain?"

"Not to speak of—physically," he replied, regarding her steadily.

As he looked up into those tender dark eyes and felt the soothing ministrations of the annoying woman's almost hypnotic hands, he recalled that Lucy had told him about Kit's being madly infatuated with him.

"Where's Lucy?" asked Lincoln, with an effort at casualness.

"She wouldn't come. She's been very nervous since yesterday. Poor kid, she seems to think all this was on her account."

"So it was, wasn't it?"

"Not on your life, darling."

"Did Lucy see me—the meeting?"

"No, I'm glad to say she didn't. But I did. . . . I got the thrill of my life until I saw you were hit and staggered and almost fell. I almost died then, Linc! You see, I knew that Miller was quick as lightning and a dead shot and I thought he had outdrawn you in spite of the fury I aroused in him before he went out to meet you. Oh, it was terrible!"

"Well, Kit, seein' three's a crowd and that Bradway doesn't need me now, I'll take myself off," Haught broke in, gazing down upon his prisoner, and as he looked, he winked one of his shrewd eyes, in a message of understanding and warning. Then he went out, his heavy foot treads ringing on the board floor.

To Lino's amazement and dismay, he suddenly felt his companion pressing against him. Her arms slipped about his neck, and her warm fragrant lips were pressed to his own. Lincoln felt her full breast throb against his. She was quivering slightly.

"Kit, this—is—very sweet and sympathetic of you," labored Lincoln awkwardly, "but you're rather heavy—leaning on me."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Linc," she cried. "That was a moment when I seemed fully to lose that awful fear that nailed me yesterday and which I could not get rid of. . . . But sympathetic! You've got me wrong, cowboy. What I feel is ten million times more wonderful than sympathy. When you get a little better—well, never mind."

"How long is this sheriff going to keep me here?"

"I don't know," replied Kit hesitatingly. "A week perhaps."

"But why?" asked Lincoln.

"He said something about the magistrate having gone to Salt Lake. He has to make *some* pretense of enforcing the law."

"Well, I'd just as soon be here as anywhere so long as I have to take it easy. I suppose you and Lucy will be going back to the ranch?"

"No. My cattle deal has missed fire. Besides I wouldn't think of going until you are out. . . . Lino, hasn't it occurred

to you yet that I might have some very serious ideas in my head?"

"I daresay," replied Lincoln constrainedly.

"What do you think is behind all this—this interest I've taken in you?"

"I hadn't thought very much about it. You have the reputation of showing interest in—cowboys, especially new ones to the country."

"That ought to prove to you how really sincere I am now," replied Kit broodingly. "Did—did you hear some talk about me in South Pass?"

"It would be rather hard to avoid hearing things about you. . . . You're the main topic of conversation on that range."

The woman's face flared red and her eyes blazed, but she kept control of her temper.

"A good deal of it is true, Lincoln," she finally said soberly. "How much depends on what has been said! When I get hold of myself I will confess more than I ever have to anyone in my whole life before. . . . Lincoln, this is my confession—there's something in you I'm not used to finding in men. I never realized it about any other man that I took a liking to . . . perhaps I'm letting my heart run away with my head."

Lincoln laughed shortly. "Well, I hope, my dear, that you get over it pronto. As a matter of fact, Kit, you'll *have* to!"

She fastened dark unfathomable eyes upon him. She seemed suddenly to sense that here was a will as strong or even stronger than her own. The flush left her cheek and she grew pale; her eyes burned darker by contrast.

"Lincoln, I shall have to convince you of many things. I am willing to make many sacrifices. I am willing,

too, to fight for the man I love," she cried with a proud look.

"Kit, you surprise me each time we meet. I don't know what's in your mind—I don't suppose anyone could ever divine that, but there are reasons why such confidences as you are making should not go any further."

"Lincoln! Why—?" she exclaimed.

The wounded man silently shook his head.

"You don't care *anything* about me—?" she cried in amazement.

"I couldn't say that," replied Lincoln gravely. "Any man you interest yourself in would be bound to care in some way. You are a beautiful, dangerous, mysterious woman. Does that mean anything to you?"

"I take it as a compliment," she replied, smiling. "If I'm mysterious, dangerous, beautiful already, I don't see that I have much to worry about. All that I have to do is turn my back on the past."

"Kit, either I'm loco or you are," he retorted, trying to keep his tone light. "I think we've said enough about it today."

"I still want to talk to you—about your meeting with Miller."

"I'd rather not say anything about that either," replied Lincoln coldly.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to," she said, simply. "You have something on your mind. I want it cleared away. Do you realize that but for me—for my upsetting Miller, it would have been one of those even breaks in which both men die?"

"That has crossed my mind," said Lincoln. "You riled him, unnerved him, made him meet me without that cold nerve which he surely would have had. But I said something to him that upset

him even more. Wouldn't you like to know what it was?"

Kit looked startled for a moment. Then she went on: "I tried to persuade him to avoid meeting you. Of course, that was a pretense. I told him you would beat him to a gun. I lied to him about you and Lucy. And I sent him out there to ask you something that he *had* to ask before he killed you."

"You wanted Miller killed, didn't you?" he queried.

"Yes, I did. He was a bad hombre. He was driving Lucy crazy. He wanted money out of me. But these things weren't important, Lincoln. I wanted you to kill him so that he couldn't kill *you*." She was earnest and persuasive, but he divined that she was not telling the whole truth. Something dark and furtive hid behind her show of tremendous sincerity.

"Was he trying to blackmail you?"

"Yes, but it was a bluff. Bad as Hank was, he wouldn't say anything against me—even if he knew it." An incredible egotism and faith in her own powers were manifest in her tone and in her words.

"Miller asked where I was from, down there in the street."

"Yes, he wanted to know who the hell you were and I didn't tell him. But did you tell him?"

"I wracked my brain for something that would give me the edge. . . . I told him—that I was Lucy Bandon's husband!"

Kit Bandon's icy little laugh rang out, but there was no amusement in the laugh. "Well, if you aren't an inventive cuss. So that was it! . . . I know just when you said that. What did he say?"

"Well," replied Linc, "he seemed to take it rather hard."

"Then what did you say?" burst out Kit, in a voice that was husky with eagerness.

"Kit, my gun did the rest of the talking," he answered, simply.

Presently Kit turned away from the window, once more composed although her dark eyes still revealed her deep emotion.

"Lincoln, I'm glad it's all over now and that I understand. I must say you are as clever with your wits as you are swift with a gun. I'll go now and come back sometime later."

She bent to kiss him, but there was no ardor now. A moment later Sheriff Haught was letting her out of the door, and locking it behind her.

CHAPTER NINE

Fire in Her Veins

LINCOLN was left alone until noon, when the waiter brought his lunch from the hotel.

It was a lavish spread for a cowboy. Haught, who had just entered, remarked dryly, "You're putting on a lot of style, young feller. The daintiest of grub and wine on the side!"

"Sheriff, how long are you going to keep me in the calaboose?"

"I thought you wanted me to keep you locked up for a while?"

While Lincoln busily applied himself to the food Haught studied him shrewdly.

"Yes, I did say that," replied Lincoln.

"But I'm O.K. now and the little embarrassment that I expected to meet is passed. Frankly, I'd like to get out." This was not strictly truthful, for he was very well pleased where he was.

However, he really wanted to find out why he was being detained.

"Well, son, I spread it around about that it was a matter of law—but it isn't that."

"All right. I'm glad of that. But I want to know what's behind it."

"This is strictly confidential, Bradway. The Bandon woman is behind it. She wants you kept here for a while."

"That was plain to see. But why? Are there any pards of Miller's around town that she's afraid I'd clash with?"

"No. That hombre was a lone wolf. She swore out a warrant, and I didn't have no choice in the matter at all."

"Thunderation then!" exclaimed Lincoln. "Why does she want to keep me locked up? Is she afraid I'll interfere with some shady deal of hers?"

"It's beyond me. I figured hard on it. Either there's someone here that she don't want you to meet or she wants to keep you away from her niece or she just wants to keep you for herself."

"Have you seen her with anyone?"

"Cattleman I don't know," replied Haught. "He's from Utah. Didn't strike me as bein' a Mormon. I made friendly advances to him which he certainly didn't meet. I know that she is sellin' a big bunch of mavericks and some other stuff which is bein' driven to Rock Springs. The stock arrived yesterday and I went down and had a look at it."

"How many head?" asked Lincoln.

"Not a big herd. Something short of three hundred. But there was a remarkable lot of yearlings in the bunch."

They exchanged penetrating glances, each attempting to read the other's hidden thoughts. The prisoner had divined that the sheriff was very curious, but that he really knew very little about Kit Bandon.

"Sheriff, let me rest your mind on

one thing. I am not in love with Kit Bandon nor mixed up with her in any way."

"Well, I wondered about that. I'm glad you came clean because I didn't want to step on your toes. I reckon if you were a little sweet on the girl that would explain how the wind blows. Son, you're skating on thin ice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If this Kit isn't loco about you, I've lost my way of figurin'. She's chain lightnin', that woman is! I wouldn't want her daid set on me unless I shared her feelin's."

The sheriff left the room with the tray but either intentionally or accidentally did not lock the door this time.

Presently Lincoln heard voices outside in the sheriff's office, and those sometimes drawling, sometimes curt, familiar tones brought him up with a start. It was undoubtedly Vince. An argument appeared to be taking place. It grew louder and more heated. "What do you want for two bits? Shall I go out an' get pinched to be put in yore old jail? I tell you Bradway will see me if you tell him his pard is here. The name is Vince."

"It's O.K., Sheriff," shouted his prisoner. "Bring him in, will you?"

At length Haught grumbly consented; his footsteps were accompanied by the slow tinkling footfalls that Lincoln recognized. The door opened to admit Haught escorting in a most disreputable little figure. Vince was ragged, dirty, haggard and unshaven. His face was hollow-eyed and gaunt. "Hello, pard. Say, what in hell's the matter with this law man? He wasn't goin' to let me in."

"Bradway, I wasn't taking any chances, for he certainly was a tough-lookin' little hombre—inclined to be too

cocky for his own good. Is he a friend of yours as he claims to be?"

"I should say he is. He must have gotten into some kind of a mess to look this way. . . . Vince, shake hands with Sheriff Haught."

"Sorry, I am sure, cowboy," replied the sheriff, as he complied with the request. "I reckon I'd be glad to meet any of Bradway's friends." He left the two together.

Lincoln called out: "Lock the door, Sheriff, and don't let anybody in, especially Miss Bandon if she should happen to return."

Vince strode over to the cot and sat down upon it to grasp Lincoln's hand in both his.

"Vince, you look like a scarecrow," said the Nebraskan, grinning. "No wonder the sheriff didn't want to let you in. You've been riding hard, hanging out in brush, going hungry and sleepless. What has happened to you? How did you know where to find me?"

"Hell! Plenty's happened. But never mind about me. What has happened to you?"

"More than plenty, Vince. I think I've got you topped. Didn't you hear anything down the street?"

"We heard a lot of stories—all different."

"Who's we?" asked Lincoln.

"Mel Thatcher an' me. He come over with me."

"How come?" queried Lincoln in surprise.

"Wal, me and Thatcher got pretty thick. He was broke and couldn't get any kind of a job. Wuss fix than me. Lee tried to drive him out of South Pass and out of the country fer thet matter. I reckon I kept Mel from mixin' in a bad fight. He shore was seein' red. I dragged him up to my place at the

livery stable an' kept him there till he cooled down. He was at his wit's end an' I think he'd hev gone to smash if I hadn't taken him in hand. I questioned him about you an' I found he's fer you all the way. Sooner or later, you'll be wantin' riders to ride fer you and fight fer you too, an' I recommend Mel Thatcher."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Lincoln. "Well, Thatcher made a good impression on me, too. Will he talk?"

"Close-lipped as an Injun dummy. Same as me. But thet don't say thet he'll always be thet way. . . . I'll tell you afterwards what happened to me an' Mel, but when we got here we heerd in the fust saloon we went in about yore run-in with Miller. After thet everywhere we asked questions the story grew wuss. We run plumb into Kit Bandon an' if looks could kill, Mel an' me shore would hev been daid long ago, but we ducked out of her way an' hunted up the jail."

"How do you think I look?" asked Linc.

"Hell! You look to me like a geezer who was on his honeymoon."

Lincoln laughed. "Well, it takes two to make a proper honeymoon, but I'm feeling pretty fine, thanks."

"Where did you get plugged?" asked Vince, feeling gently around Lincoln's bandage.

"Under the collar bone. Clean as a whistle. I'm rarin' to go right now."

"Wal, what's keepin' you here? It was an even break. This sheriff hasn't got no case against you."

"I'll tell you later," responded Linc. "But I've got some news, Vince, that I can't keep any longer."

"Yea? Wal, you kinda look like you was bustin' with somethin'."

"The first day I got here," began Lin-

coln swiftly, "I ran into Kit and Lucy with this fellow Miller." The Nebraskan went on to relate the events leading up to his marriage to Lucy.

"Wha—a—t!" stuttered Vince incredulously, "You, married to Lucy?"

"It sounds like a dream but it happened," said Lincoln.

Vince stared at his friend. "An' all the time Kit Bandon has lost her haid over you—the fust time in her life!"

"I don't know about that, Vince, but she comes in here and acts and talks like it."

"You've signed yore own death warrant. You might as well cash in right now. Haven't you got no sense? Couldn't you wait? Didn't you hev any hunch about what kind of a woman this she-cat is? . . . She'll *kill* you, man, as shore as yore the onluckiest cuss who ever breathed. An' like as not, she'll kill pore Lucy too."

"But, Vince, she doesn't know it yet! Besides, you don't think I'm going to sit idly by if Lucy is in danger!"

"Did you fix the parson so he won't tell? queried Vince.

"I'm sure it won't leak out there."

"Who else knows?"

"Only Lucy—and I told Miller that last second before he died."

"Lordy! Yore a cold-blooded hombre. . . . Lucy ought to know Kit well enough to keep her mouth shet but it won't hurt none to scare her half to death. And how about you, Mr. Bridegroom? Can you keep from shootin' off yore chin?"

"I don't know, Vince. Sometimes I'm afraid I can't. If she drives me too far—"

"Nuff said," interposed Vince. "I can guess the rest. Now fer Lord Amighty's sake, listen to me. Explain this to Lucy no matter what risk you run and let Kit make all the fuss she wants over

you even if it kills you. It'd be better to stand fer that, wouldn't it, than to be daid?"

"Vince, I can't let Kit make a fool of herself," protested Lincoln.

"Why cain't you?" queried Vince angrily.

"I can't—because, well, I just don't trust myself where that woman is concerned," retorted Lincoln desperately. "I know she's playing a deep game, and may be implicated in Jimmy's murder. But in spite of all that I can't hate her for it. I *couldn't* love her, but—neither can I hate her...."

"She's got hell's fire in her veins," interrupted Vince. "Take my hunch, pard, keep that secret until you an' Lucy can run away or till somethin' happens, an' you can bet yore life somethin' is goin' to happen."

"What do you mean, Vince?" demanded the Nebraskan.

"I don't know. I don't know any more than you. But, man, in the very nature of things out here on this Wyomin' border where there ain't no law or morality, where the times is hard an' men are desprit, I jest cain't believe thet even a woman, beautiful as she is, can go on forever makin' fools of men an' bein' a law onto herself."

"All right, Vince. I'll keep the secret if I can prevail upon Lucy to trust me."

"It'll be tough, but yore married to her an' Kit cain't take thet away. . . . Now, listen to what I've got to tell you. There's been some high old goin's on in South Pass since you left. The cowboys is upset because of the rumor thet the cattlemen in the Sweetwater Valley are goin' to fire them in a bunch an' go to Caspar an' Cheyenne to hire other hands. Lee is the ringleader of the ranchers. Some say he's crazy about Kit Bandon and others say he hates

her. I reckon he does both, because Kit made a fool out of him same's the rest, Hargrove, Burton, Nesbit, Seymour. MacNeil, all the cattlemen down the river were in town fer two days. They had a securt meetin'. It had to do with these cattlemen bandin' themselves together to put a united front against any and all kinds of rustlin'. These cattlemen hev been slow to wrath. There's a reason fer thet which you might guess. But it's settled now—they're as mad as hornets an' it's goin' to go hard with anyone they ketch stealin' cattle."

"Well, Vince, that was in the air when I was in South Pass."

"Yes, but it hadn't oome to a haid yet. The day after thet meetin' Thatcher heard from Bill Haines thet a cowboy had been caught red-handed an' was bein' held down in the river bottom by the riders who had caught him. Thet night after dark Thatcher an' me rode out of South Pass an' we made a beeline fer the river bottom. When we got to Hargrove's ranch about midnight we scouted all around lookin' fer a campfire. Couldn't find nothin' so we made camp ourselves."

"Next day we kept out of sight but we watched the trails. Thatcher went one way an' I went another. Long in the afternoon late Thatcher came back an' said he had spotted buckboards an' saddle hosses on the Hargrove road. We sneaked out along the edge of the willows until we caught sight of them an' then we hid an' let them pass. Then we followed them. They stopped at Hargrove's ranch. This was along about sunset. A little later we saw a man come out of the willows below us, look all around as if he didn't want to be seen, an' then run across the road into the ranch yard. We figgered thet he was

goin' to inform these cattlemen where the prisoner that had been reported caught was bein' held.

"Wal, to make a long story short, as soon as it was dark a bunch of men took the trail single-file behind their guides and went into the brush. Me an' Thatcher followed but not too close. Half a mile in we saw a light in a clearin' an' we planned to sneak off the trail one on each side an' get as close as possible. An' we arranged to meet at our campin' place later. I didn't hev to go very far on my side before I came up to the edge of the thicket an' saw the campfire a hundred steps or more away. I lay low an' watched an' listened.

"There was thirteen men in the bunch not countin' a young feller they had tied to a saplin'. I couldn't see his face well but it was familiar. I recognized Lee, Hargrove, Burton, Nesbit, and Summers in the firelight. It was jest like a hangin' party. Lee and Hargrove did the talkin' but I couldn't ketch what they said. But I distinctly heerd the cowboy say no. He said it several times an' shook his head violently. Then they ripped off his coat an' shirt and beat him over the bare back. Lee was the fust to use the whip. Purty soon he stopped and asked the cowboy again some question. It was plain to me then thet Lee wanted him to confess somethin'. I heerd Hargrove say, 'But they caught you rustlin' calves.' An' the cowboy yelled: 'Hang me and be damned!'

"They tried beatin' him again. They were a pretty hard bunch, at their rope's end. But they didn't hang him. Mebbe they thought they could make him give up later. Anyway they untied him and led him away. I waited until they was gone and then slipped out in

the open and made my way to our camp. Thatcher did not come back fer two hours. I told him what I'd seen and waited fer him to spill what he had seen. But he didn't do it. All he said was: 'Wait!' He seemed kind of dazed. In the mornin' early we rode back to South Pass in time to get the stage."

Lincoln maintained a long silence. "Vince, as if I didn't have enough to think about without worryin' about you! . . . Suppose you shave yourself and put on one of my clean shirts. By the way, is Thatcher as tough looking a hombre as you are?"

"No, he ain't, pard. But he's pretty seedy at thet."

"And of course you're both broke."

"Wal, I had jest enough money left of thet you gave me to get here."

"Well, I'll dig up some more. Now clean yourself up and rustle out of here."

While Vince made haste to wash and render himself more presentable, Lincoln lay back on the bed and went over Vince's story again. The Nebraskan had experienced many an uprising of the cattlemen, but this was the first time he had ever known it to be a war to be waged upon cowboys.

The deduction was inevitable. It pointed to a grave and complex situation in the valley; it involved Kit Bandon's machinations, whatever they were; a good many of the cowboys, perhaps all of them; and probably more than one rancher. What was this vigilante band of cattlemen really aiming to accomplish? To stop the rustling? Or was it something else? He must hurry back to South Pass in order to find out.

"Wal, boss, how do I look?" spoke up Vince, approaching his partner.

"Very much better, cowboy. Now you

take this money and join Thatcher, get him to make himself look decent, catch yourselves something to eat. Then keep your eyes peeled and your wits about you. No more red liquor, no bucking the tiger, and avoid the Bandons. Savvy that?"

"O.K., boss. I'm shore Mel will be glad yore takin' him on."

"All right. That's fine. Bring him to see me early in the morning."

Vince met Sheriff Haught in the corridor. "Wal, cowboy, you don't look quite so disreputable. Stick that gun you're packin' round under your coat so it don't show so plain."

A melodious voice could be heard outside in the corridor. "Ahuh," continued the sheriff, "speaking of angels or would you say the opposite—I think you have callers, Linc." After he had stamped noisily out, Lincoln recognized the two feminine voices in reply to the sheriff's greeting. Kit Bandon entered, followed by Lucy and Haught. Haught stopped in the doorway to speak to someone else outside. The Nebraskan forgot all caution. His glance passed by Kit, and for a moment his eyes met the blue eyes of Lucy Bradway. Almost imperceptibly she shook her head. He turned quickly to face Kit Bandon, who evidently had missed the exchange between the two.

"Hello, Linc," said Kit. "I thought I would run up a few minutes, and I finally prevailed on Lucy to come with me."

"How do you do, Lucy?" said Lincoln.

"Good evening," replied Lucy composedly. She walked up to the couch and gazed down upon him. She was quite pale in the dim light and her eyes shone darkly. "And how are you?"

"Just fine—for a cripple," replied Lincoln. "It is very good of you to come and see me."

At that juncture a waiter appeared bearing a white-covered tray which he deposited upon a little table by Bradways couch.

"Thanks," replied Lincoln. "You're awfully good to me—but I'm not going to stay in here forever."

"No, of course not," said Kit. "But you had better start in on your supper before it gets cold. Sheriff, will you take Lucy into your office while I talk over some business with Mr. Bradway?"

Sitting up, Linc caught Lucy's eyes again and he made a slight motion with his head, which he hoped she would interpret correctly. Then he said: "You talk, Kit, while I eat."

She waited until the sheriff had ushered Lucy out of the room and into his office across the corridor. Lincoln noticed that the girl was not as radiant as she had been when she came in a few moments before. She was quiet and tense, and her eyes were dark and sad.

"You'll have to do most of the talking, cowboy. I want to know some mighty important things."

"What about?" he asked. He was not perturbed; he held the advantage over Kit Bandon in every way, except in regard to Lucy. Kit pulled a chair close to where Linc now was sitting at the table.

"Lincoln, I just ran plumb into Mel Thatcher and that ex-cowboy Vince," she announced. "Do you know them?"

"I met Thatcher in South Pass and I'm quite well acquainted with Vince."

"Could they by any chance be here to see you?"

"They could, and they are," replied the Nebraskan coolly.

"I guessed it then," retorted Kit with a snap of her fingers. "What is their relation to you?"

"Well, I'd say Vince had the makings of a real pard. According to him, Thatcher will stack up about the same way."

"How did this come about?" queried Kit.

"I ran into Vince in South Pass. He was down on his luck, broke and hungry, and I cottoned to him, that's all. According to Vince, this cowboy, Thatcher is pretty bad off too. Lee fired him. He can't get anybody to give him a job on the range, and naturally he was pretty desperate. Vince brought him over here to see if I wouldn't have him throw in with us."

"Kind of a Good Samaritan, eh?" inquired Kit with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"Kit, maybe it's a weakness, but I am pretty liable to take the part of the underdog, especially when he happens to be somebody I'm fond of. I like Thatcher and I think a heap of Vince."

"What do you aim to do with them?"

"Well, I've got plenty of money, as you know, and I'll let them trail around with me for a while."

Kit half rose from her chair. "You can't do that," she said, her voice rising.

"Beg pardon?" inquired Bradway, politely.

"I said you can't do that," repeated Kit.

"And why not?"

"Because I won't stand for it."

Linc laughed. "Excuse me, lady, but what I do, what friends I choose to make, and what cowboys I put on my payroll have nothing at all to do with you."

"Lincoln!" she cried incredulously. He quickly perceived that she had completely overestimated her power over him.

"Kit, you have been flattering enough

to express your interest in me and you've certainly been very kind to me since I got shot up. I'm grateful, of course, but you must know that I can't take orders from you."

It was evident that she was unused to this kind of indifference from any man. She controlled her anger with an effort.

"Lincoln, I have made some great plans—which involve you."

"You are very good, but don't you think you should consult me before making plans which involve me?"

"I want to sell out my cattle and my ranch and move down the Sweetwater into new country. . . . I'm going to Salt Lake tomorrow to see my banker and make a deal for my property. I will have a pretty big stake when the deal is settled. Will you leave this part of Wyoming with me?"

"In what capacity?" asked Lincoln.

"Partner."

"Kit, I couldn't make a deal like that with you."

"Why not?" she flashed quickly.

"Well, there are several good reasons. I still have some unfinished business to settle around South Pass, and I would not let down Thatcher and Vince. I don't like the way things are shaping up in the Sweetwater Valley, and I would not want to share in any way with your other partner, Emery."

"I'll get rid of Emery."

"Well, that's something—but still . . ."

"What do you mean by things shaping up in the valley?" she interrupted, sharply.

"Thatcher and Vince brought me some very disquieting news. Looks like a cowboy and cattlemen war is brewing over along the Sweetwater."

"I've seen that coming for a long

while," she replied, without losing her composure. "That's one reason why I want to get out before it comes to a head. But those cattlemen are slow to act. . . . Too many of them distrust each other. I question if they would hold together if it came to a showdown."

"I don't share that opinion, Kit," replied Lincoln, coldly. "I am anxious to go back to South Pass and find out for myself. I think there have been some developments in the last few days. It might be of more interest to you than you think."

"What might be?" asked Kit.

"Why, just what these cattlemen are up to over there. From what I gather, they don't like you. Some of them wanted to marry you and got scorned for their pains. And there are some other reasons which you probably know better than I do. Lee, Hargrove, and for all I know, others might share a good deal of animosity toward you."

"That might well be," replied Kit, thoughtfully. "In fact I know it's true. But what can they do to me?" Her voice expressed pride, arrogance, and conviction. "We'll go back home the day after I return from Salt Lake. I'll say good-by."

Lincoln arose from the table. "Kit, I don't promise that I'll be here when you return." He did not mean this remark, but he was curious to see what her reaction to it would be. She appeared startled; her restraint broke and she came close to him manifestly agitated, and at that moment more appealing to him than she ever had been. Suddenly she threw her arms about him and kissed him passionately.

"Lincoln, I'm crushed by your indifference. Perhaps I've been too rash in revealing to you how I feel. I've always

had my way. But surely . . . well, never mind about that, now. Just kiss me good-by."

The Nebraskan forgot his promise to Vince; it was as if he were being carried along by an irresistible current. Kit's face took on a rosy flush. She laughed happily and broke from him and ran toward the door. Lincoln heard her gaily call to the sheriff and Lucy. Gloomily he wondered if they could leave without the girl saying good-by. When they had gone without a word of farewell, he returned to his supper minus his appetite. From the window he watched the sheriff and Kit quit the hotel, with Lucy behind them. His heart sank; would not Lucy even turn back to wave her hand to him? But yes, she had turned to look for him through the bars of the window. Warily, even timidly, she stopped to touch her hand to her lips in a token kiss. Her action brought comfort to the prisoner. But it also brought shame for his weakness of a few moments before.

CHAPTER TEN

Irresistible Kit

LUCY BANDON'S shy but eloquent gesture held Lincoln at the window for some time.

Finally he returned to his big chair, happiness for the first time crowding out the somberness of his former mood. Perhaps it was not too much for him to hope for a happy culmination of their love.

Next morning he awoke at dawn. While dressing he noticed the sunrise flush upon the snow of the Utah peaks. From the other window in the distance he could see the familiar features of

the Wyoming foothills, glorious in the clear morning light. The morning was fresh and cold.

Haught came bustling in, cheery and friendly.

After a brief conversation Lincoln's breakfast arrived, followed soon after by Vince and Thatcher. The two cowboys were clad in clean jeans and showed the good effects of sleep and rest. Sheriff Haught stood by the door as they came in.

"Good mawnin', boys. I hope durin' your sojourn in Rock Springs I won't have to escort you here officially." He went out, his little eyes twinkling merrily, and closed the door.

"You're just in time for a cup of coffee and maybe something else besides. The hotel waiter usually brings me a good deal more than I can eat."

"We had our breakfast," said Vince, "but I reckon another cup of coffee wouldn't go so bad."

"Vince, I think I want you to go back to South Pass today."

"O.K. by me," replied Vince. "Any orders, boss?"

"Wait," returned Lincoln. "Thatcher, how would you like to throw in with us?"

"Here's my hand, Bradway," said the cowboy, thrusting out a lean brown paw. "I think you're a square shooter. I've been on the ragged edge for a few days but this offer of yours gives me a new start."

The Nebraskan returned the strong handclasp and watched the warm light that shone in Thatcher's eyes. He knew cowboys, and these two would be fit partners to tie to. "Good," he responded heartily, "that settles that."

"Bradway, I'll get this off my chest pronto. Did you come here to meet Hank Miller?" queried Thatcher.

"Partly. But really I reckon I was following Lucy Bandon. Has Vince told you how it is with her and me?"

"No, Vince didn't say much—but I guessed it."

"Lucy agreed to meet me at the Pass and when she failed to show up I became worried and thought it best to follow her. I was afraid that Kit was trying to make Lucy think her aunt had me roped and tied."

Thatcher let out a short laugh. "Ha! Kit could do that little thing, pronto—Now about Miller. He forced you to draw on him?"

"He sure did."

"Bradway, it strikes me you fellows wouldn't draw without a word with each other."

"No, we had quite a few words."

"He didn't know you—never had heard of you?"

"No, I was a stranger to him. Hadn't the slightest suspicion that I was Jimmy Weston's friend."

"Then you asked him—something about Jimmy?" queried Thatcher, a little huskily.

"Yes, I told him plenty. I said: 'I know that you hauled him away from Kit Brandon's ranch dead or alive.' . . . And Miller replied, 'Not alive—dead!'"

"Pard, Miller would seem to have insinuated there that he had killed your friend. But as a matter of fact he didn't kill Jimmy."

Vince emitted a prolonged low whistle. Linc stared. He wondered about Thatcher's agitation.

"As a matter of fact I really didn't suspect Miller of killing Jimmy," Lincoln continued. "In the last moment he showed guilt of some kind but not that kind of guilt."

"Never mind how I come to know, but that's the truth," concluded Mel

hurriedly, snatching up his cup and gulping its contents.

The Nebraskan dropped his eyes to his plate. He did not want to reveal more just then. Mel had added another thought-provoking angle to this mystery. It was conceivable, Bradway thought, that he might know who actually had killed Jimmy, but the fact that Thatcher, through his own choice, did not go further in untangling the plot seemed to be a proof that somehow Kit Bandon was involved in it.

"Thanks, Mel," he said thoughtfully. "That's something. Let's not talk about it any more now."

Suddenly Vince spoke up. "Boss, excuse me, but I think this is the time to ask you somethin'. Not fer my sake, or fer Mel's, but fer Lucy's! Now thet she is a part of this thing, you jest can't handle the deal as you were goin' to before."

"All right, Vince, come out with it."

"Don't hold this agin me, but wouldn't it—jest wouldn't it be a good idee fer Lucy's sake to fergit about this Jimmy Weston deal?"

"What are you talking about, Vince? How can I overlook it—even for Lucy's sake?" expostulated Lincoln.

"Wal, I see it thet way, thet's all. Is it fair to Lucy fer you to go on diggin' up this lousy deal? Yore pretty shore to hev more gunplay and you cain't be so damn shore thet yore goin' to go on bein' lucky."

"Vince, I appreciate how you feel, old timer, but I can't give up this deal. I suppose I am bull-headed enough—conceited enough perhaps—to believe I can avenge Jimmy's murder and still get out of it with a whole skin."

"Thet's fair talk, Linc. One way or another Mel and I are bound to trail with you."

"All right. Let's get back to business. Here's some money. You and Mel take the morning stage back to South Pass. I'll be there in two or three days—maybe sooner. I want to know more about the activity of the cattlemen there. Use your own heads and smoke out all you can. If you go down in the valley leave word at the livery stable with Bill Headly where you're going and where I can find you. I'll trail you pronto. I don't need to remind you any more to lay off the drink—We've got to have clear heads."

"Bradway, I must tell you," interposed Thatcher, "something that I've kept from Vince. I wanted to think more about it. I recognized the cowboy who was beaten that night. His name is Bud Harkness. I knew him pretty well. Just as fine a cowpuncher as ever forked a horse. Now, I'll tell you something else. If they don't hang him, Harkness will kill Hargrove because while Lee is evidently the leader of these vigilantes, Hargrove and his hired men are responsible for tripping Harkness up."

"That only makes things worse," said Lincoln. "There'll be a cowboy-cattleman war over there as sure as I'm sitting here."

"That's exactly what'll happen if the cattlemen don't lay off the cowboys," broke in Vince.

"But beating a cowboy over his bare back for stealing calves! There's more to it than that," exclaimed the Nebraskan.

"Maybe they didn't beat him for stealing calves!" said Thatcher, darkly.

"They wanted to make him talk," declared Linc.

"Sure," admitted Thatcher. "And Harkness won't ever talk."

Vince spoke up. "Boss, we'll hev to

rustle if we ketch that stage. We'll hev more to tell you when you get to South Pass. I reckon you better try to get set to come along pronto."

"I think so," replied Lincoln soberly. "Look for me day after tomorrow. Good-by and good luck."

He had not dared to hope that Lucy would come to see him today. Still, there was a possibility. Quite probably Kit would not wish to take Lucy with her to Salt Lake.

At that very moment Lincoln heard the sheriff's deep voice greeting someone in the outer room. It was followed by an excited little laugh, quickly recognizable as Lucy's. The door swung open and Haught stuck his head in, his gray eyes twinkling.

"Bradway, can you spare time to see a young lady who says she wants to pass the time of day?" he drawled.

"Haught, bring her in!"

The sheriff shoved open the door to reveal Lucy, clad in a new becoming blue costume with a small bunch of flowers adorning her coat. To Lincoln it seemed that he had never seen anything so beautiful as the blue of her eyes or the flush that tinged her cheek.

"Go on in, lady," said the sheriff. "He looks kinda like he might want to see you after all. . . . Wal, young folks, I'll lock this gate and stand guard." He closed the door, chuckling to himself. For an instant they stood looking into each other's eyes; then she literally ran into his arms. . . .

"Lincoln, oh my darling!" she whispered.

Lincoln strained her to him, kissing her flushed cheeks and closed eyes and at last her parted lips. For a moment her ardor equaled his own; then she drew back.

"Oh, Linc, it has been terrible! Es-

pecially after I knew about you and Hank, when I knew you were wounded."

"It's really true, then?" he queried, tenderly.

"Is what true?" she asked.

"That you really love me?"

"Do I? Oh, wonderfully, terribly, Lincoln. But since that night—not so despairingly."

"Oh, Lucy," cried Linc, "when your aunt said she was leaving for Salt Lake City, I hoped that you might come—"

"Kit was undecided whether to take me or not, but when I said I'd rather wait for her here she decided not to. She won't be back till night, and then in the morning we take the stage for home."

"Lucy, I'll be on that stage."

"Oh, wonderful. But will the sheriff let you go?"

"He can't keep me any longer. There really was no case against me. And my shoulder is fit as a fiddle."

"I can't stay as long as you want me," murmured Lucy. "You see, my dear—husband—I have a lot of packing to do. I'm afraid I can stay only till lunch time. Will that be long enough?"

"That depends on how sweet and wifelike you can be," he said, and again he gave way to his joy and rapture to overwhelm her with his hunger for the sweet fire of her lips. For a space they wholly forgot themselves as they clung to each other in their close embrace. Then Lucy drew away from him to remove the hat he had disarranged and the flowers that he had crushed.

"Where are your rings?" asked Lincoln.

"Here," she replied as with shining eyes and with unsteady fingers she turned back the collar of her dress revealing the white, graceful curve of

her breast and a little folded silk handkerchief which was pinned to the cloth of her bodice. "Here they are," she whispered. "I wear them pinned inside my dress. I've acquired such a habit of putting my hand to feel if they are safe that Kit already has remarked about it. She asked me if I'd caught cold or if anything ailed me. I try to be more careful now."

"You must be, Lucy. A great deal depends on that. Never forget for a minute that our secret must not be discovered. . . . That brings me to something I must get off my chest pronto." Lincoln hesitated, then plunged on. "I don't like to admit—but I'm afraid Kit really has a case on me. Evidently she still believes that no man can resist her. And that's where I am in a predicament. She seems to have no conscience about revealing her feelings and I'm afraid modesty was completely left out of her make-up."

"But, Lincoln, it wouldn't do for you to—to show your true feelings—until we—" He kissed her faltering lips. She understood and he was glad.

"So I promised Vince . . . that no matter what she did I would not upset the chuck wagon. In other words, for the time being, until we know where we stand in this deal, I've got to play along her way. Are you sure this won't make you unhappy—make you jealous—make you distrust me?"

"I'll never distrust you again, Lincoln. I'm not so sure about not being jealous, but I'm your wife. What will sustain me is that before long we will get away on our own. I can stand anything as long as I am sure of that. Only, when Kit makes so—so much over you, please don't tell me."

"Lucy, you are a thoroughbred. That was the only thing that I was afraid of.

I think I can handle the rest of it."

"Do you think we can get clear away from all this hateful situation soon?"

"Probably we'll have to. But not until my job here is done."

Lucy averted her face and made no comment.

"Lucy, when you and I do make our getaway, I don't want to go too far away from this part of Wyoming," he continued. "I love it here. It's a beautiful country, rich in land and water and grass and game. There are many good ranches from which a man can choose. I've got the money to make a start. Once let us get out of this mess and we can begin making a home for ourselves."

"Lincoln, there is one spot that I want you to see. It's on the headwaters of the Sweetwater—the valley I told you about, where my friend the old trapper lives. He has homesteaded some acreage up there, and just above it is the loveliest country in the world."

"I'm afraid that's a little close to South Pass, but tell me about it."

"It is close," replied Lucy thoughtfully. "About twenty miles over the hills and a little less from our ranch. There's a good trail. I can ride it in two hours, but of course that is going at a pretty good clip."

"Are you free to ride up there whenever you choose?"

"Yes. That's one place Kit does not object to my going. You see, it's out of the way, no roads to cross, no cattle or cowboys, seldom any Indians. I never go in hunting season. I've met bears and bull moose and elk on that trail that were as tame as cows."

"All right. But tell me what it's like—"

The hours flew by, while the lovers dreamed and planned, gazing out of the

window toward the mountains that hid the valley of the Sweetwater, quite oblivious to the fact that they were in the town jail and that Linc was still a prisoner. The noon hour arrived before they were aware of it, and reluctantly Lucy told Lincoln that she must leave.

"You make pretty speeches, Lincoln, and I would love to stay longer to hear you make more of them, but I must go. Is there anything we have forgotten?"

"We haven't planned to meet again."

"Well—how about one week from today?"

"But that seems so long!"

"It won't be long, dear, with all we have to do. I'll plan to ride up the river in the early morning one week from today, Wednesday. When you wish to meet me, leave South Pass early in the morning—at sunrise, ride up the stream to the head of the canyon, climb straight to the top and head west. Four or five miles across you can see down into the Sweetwater. It'll be rough going down the slope but you can grade down without any trouble and find the trail. I'll be waiting for you either at the trapper's cabin or up on our terrace."

"I'll be there, darling," she replied. He rapped upon the door to call Sheriff Haught. In another moment Lucy's heels were clicking down the corridor, bearing her away from him.



The subsequent night was long and wearying for Lincoln, owing to frequent wakeful spells, but with the dawn he arose early, glad that the time had come that he was to leave Rock Springs. He packed the black gambler's

suit, thinking as he did so that its success had hardly justified its expense. That first meeting with Lucy, however, when she had scarcely recognized him, was something to remember. He shaved rather carefully. Then he donned his worn cowboy jeans, boots and spurs, and checkered blouse. For a necktie he used a red scarf. The short jacket of this suit revealed his gun hanging very much in evidence below his hip. A few minutes before he was packed and ready to go Sheriff Haught entered.

"Well, son, you're goin' to leave me I see."

"Haught, you're the best sheriff I ever knew, and that's saying a lot. I won't forget your tipping me off about that man Miller. It could be that I owe you my life. Good-by and may we meet again."

Lincoln went to a restaurant on a side street and while disposing of his breakfast had the woman put him up a lunch. He asked directions to the stagecoach stop and went directly there. Presently the stage rolled up and he was pleased to note that the only other passengers were the two Bandons and that Kit made no effort to conceal her surprise and chagrin over his presence. Lucy sat on the driver's seat, clad in a long gray ulster with a veil wound around her hat. Her eyes passed over Lincoln roguishly, with an air of possession, although she merely acknowledged his greeting with a nod. The driver, a stalwart man whom Lincoln did not know, helped him with his baggage and told him to climb inside. Inside Kit had recovered from her surprise and was leaning forward eagerly to greet him.

"Hello, Kit," he replied to her greeting. "Looks like we're not going to have any company."

"Yes, aren't we lucky? It will be the first time I ever rode home without being crowded."

Presently the stage heaved and creaked as the driver climbed to his seat. Soon it was rolling out of town behind two fresh teams. Linc put his head out the window and raised his voice above the clatter of hoofs, the rumbling of the wheels, the clink of chains to call: "Lucy, you're going to get pretty cold up there and dusty too."

"Well, I'm no tenderfoot like some I could name," replied Lucy saucily. "I'm going to ride outside if we run into a cyclone."

"She's not very flattering," said the Nebraskan, turning to Kit. "She doesn't seem to want to ride inside with us."

"I'm dead tired and sleepy," said Kit. "I couldn't sleep on the train and I imagine I won't be very good company today."

She sank down against Lincoln and before they were well out upon the prairie she was asleep. They were occupying the front seat of the stagecoach. When Lincoln stuck his long arm out the window he managed to touch Lucy and eventually take hold of her hand. The soft pressure of her fingers was comforting, but he wished he could be up there with her on the driver's seat.

The long hours passed swiftly. Traveling back in the opposite direction he found the land looked familiar; the gray sage reaches rolled by him endlessly. Looking ahead he could see the curved hills and the ravines choked with green and occasionally a stream winding away toward the south. In some stretches he could view far horizons but no mountains. The road was smooth with very little grade, and the horses made fast time. Several hours

out, the driver halted in a grove of trees, through which a brook ran.

"Here's where we rest a bit and have a snack of grub," he called out cheerily.

"Driver, it looks as though we are going to have some weather," announced the Nebraskan.

"Yes, it's clouding up. Snow squall coming down from the hills."

"I'll eat my lunch inside," Kit decided.

"Cowboy, you build a fire," suggested the driver, "while I take care of the horses. Then I'll make some coffee."

"And I'll stretch my legs," said Lucy, swinging off under the trees. When she returned coffee and sandwiches were being served and Lincoln observed that Lucy warmed her hands by the little fire. The wind blew chill, rustling through the trees and presently as the sun paled and then disappeared altogether, it grew quite cold.

"Wal, I think we might as well be movin' along," announced the driver. "And Miss, you ride inside this afternoon. It's goin' to be squally."

"How long to West Fork?" asked Lincoln.

"Oh, it won't take us long," replied the driver. "All downhill. We'll make it easy before dark. But you folks want to cover up well."

Once more in the coach, Linc found himself seated across from Lucy. Kit was not slow to make herself comfortable, appropriating Lincoln's shoulder and closing her eyes.

"Cover me up well," she ordered sleepily.

What with a blanket and a heavy robe they were reasonably well protected from the drafty stagecoach. Lucy stretched out, her feet coming in contact with those of her husband. She gave Lincoln a sly little smile before

she closed her eyes. Kit was the first to drift off to sleep, and Lucy quickly followed suit.

When he was awakened by a sudden jar of the stage he found that the afternoon was far gone and they had reached West Fork, where they were to spend the night.

When they pulled out of West Fork, Linc discovered that they still had the coach to themselves. Lucy rode on top with the driver; and Kit blithely informed Lincoln that she would make up that day for her dullness of yesterday. She quizzed her traveling mate concerning Vince and Thatcher and also asked about Sheriff Haught and what he had told him about her, if anything. "Did he give me away?" she asked archly.

"What do you mean?" queried the cowboy.

"Did he tell you that I hired him to keep you in jail?" she went on mischievously.

"Well, he hinted it," he replied. "What was your idea in doing that?"

"Oh, I wanted you well taken care of where I could see you alone. That didn't get me very far, did it?"

"I think you went plenty far," he replied.

"Tell me," she said simply, "what seems to be the difficulty between us?"

"Well, I'm afraid there are a few obstacles, Kit. One in particular is that I don't seem to feel the way you are trying to make me think you feel."

"I gathered that. It's a sad blow to my vanity. Serves me right, though. But *that* is no obstacle to me, as you will discover, cowboy. Name some of the other ones."

"Excuse me, Kit. I'd rather not hurt your feelings."

"But you have already hurt me ter-

ribly," she protested. "A little more or less won't make any difference."

"No!"

"Is it my partner, Emery?" she persisted.

"Well, his relation to you is none of my business, but as a matter of fact I thought it was pretty low-down for you to be associated with a rat of a gambler in that dive."

"Yes," she admitted frankly. "But if I realized it before, I didn't care. Now I do care. I'm not the same Kit Bandon. Just the same, this one thing you must believe, Linc. I have been mixed up with Emery in the *Leave It* but that's all. Usually I have never cared what one man thought about my relation to another man—but I want you to know that he was *not* my lover."

Lincoln did not venture any reply to her plea to be understood.

"Lincoln, you believe me, don't you?" she demanded.

"Yes, I believe you," replied Lincoln, slowly.

"Thank you. . . . Then is it the gossip you heard about me in South Pass? My name being linked with Lee and Hargrove and other cattlemen?"

"That meant nothing to me."

"They all ran after me, made love to me in their clumsy ways—the old goats," she said, scornfully. "I'll admit I did play around with Lee, perhaps too much. A couple of years ago I thought I might even marry him. It might have been a good idea. . . . As a matter of fact, it would have been much better for me if I had—but I didn't know it then. Lincoln, you don't seem to be the jealous type; but just the same, men are alike. I want you to know that I went around with Lee off and on because I really liked him . . . is that clear to you?"

"Perfectly clear, Kit."

"You won't have any queer ideas about Lee and me now that I've set you straight?"

"Queer? Hardly that. I suppose it's a woman's privilege to lead any man on if she wants to, but it isn't very honorable."

"You really have heard a lot about me, haven't you?"

"Kit, you don't seem to realize that a colorful person like yourself is bound to be talked about. Every move you make makes gossip—good or bad."

"What did Jimmy tell you?" she whispered.

"He wrote me that you took him away from Lucy—and the words he used were hardly fit to quote to you."

Her head sank a little on his shoulder. He felt her fingers tighten, then relax. Mention of Jimmy Weston's name always seemed to stir her. Would he ever discover what the true relationship between those two had been? Presently she spoke, quite composedly: "Lincoln, I did come between Lucy and Jimmy. She was taken with him and I was afraid she would overdo it. I'm bound to admit that I liked him myself pretty well. He was good-looking, gay, full of mischief—the best company ever, but he was as unstable as water, absolutely unreliable, impossible for me to accept as Lucy's husband."

Lincoln at length replied somewhat huskily: "In that case probably you were justified in separating them. But not by making him care for you. I am speaking frankly, Kit, because Jimmy was my best friend."

"That has always been my weakness," she rejoined, simply. "That is my weakness now and it's ten thousand times stronger than it ever was."

"Jimmy wrote me a wild, disconnect-

ed letter probably under the influence of despair or liquor and I did not take that part of it as absolutely reliable. But I'd appreciate it if you would let the subject of Jimmy drop between us."

"That's all right with me," she replied in quick relief. "As for the other cowboys, you must remember that I am a rancher; dealing in cattle is my business. I've hired dozens of cowboys in the valley. I've befriended them—gotten them out of jail, redeemed their saddles and guns that they had pawned, lent them money—in fact, had a sort of motherly feeling for all of them. Then, you must remember again, I am a young woman—and even if *you* never seemed to be aware of it, they have told me repeatedly that I am rather attractive."

Bradway laughed at this. "Yes," he said coolly. "Even if I never let you wind me around your little finger, Kit, it wasn't because you were hard to look at."

"Please don't joke at a moment like this, Lincoln. I'm going out of my way to try to establish my true character in your mind. The fact that good-looking cowboys fell in love with me from time to time never troubled me until you came to South Pass. I'll admit, I even encouraged them to. . . . Now all I want you to understand is that this cowboy nonsense and foolishness is behind me. I'm through. You can give yourself the credit for that."

"Thanks, Kit, but I'm a cowboy, too."

"Yes, but if you must split hairs, I was speaking of those thoughtless friendships, trifling and of no consequence. . . ."

"Kit, all this confidence of yours is interesting but it's a little embarrassing. I don't know what you're driving at."

"Lincoln," she said after an interval of silence, "please listen. If I ever spoke the truth I'm telling it now. If good can ever overcome selfishness and love of power in a woman then it has done that to me. I always feared this thing would happen to me. It is perhaps no different from what other women have experienced but in me it is a thousand times stronger. . . . All that life—all that has happened since I came to the Sweetwater is passed—gone forever. I intend to sell my ranch and I want to move somewhere else in Wyoming far away where no one ever heard of me. I love you, Linc, as no other woman ever loved in this world. If you ask me why, I'd say it was retribution. I have held love lightly. Now it holds me in a grip which I wouldn't loosen if I could. At this moment, Lincoln, I'm so humble in my love that I would be willing to plead with you to take it. I will be happy with anything you can give. Linc, you don't realize what it means that the once proud woman whom they call the Maverick Queen is on her knees before you. With all my heart and soul I swear my change of heart. . . . Lincoln, will you go away with me?"

"Kit—I can't," he replied huskily.

"Is it because you don't care for me?"

"No."

"Is it because you don't care enough?"

"No."

"Is it because you still doubt—?"

"No, it's not that either, Kit, I don't know that it would make any difference to a man whether he had any doubts about a beautiful woman like you if he knew he wanted her to be his wife. I think the only thing that would count with a man would be what his heart told him. Life would be an adventure with you that a million men would give

their souls to undertake. But it is impossible to go away with you, Kit."

"Tell me why," she whispered patiently.

"You wouldn't understand the reasons I gave you," he replied hurriedly. "The main reason—is that I've already got a wife!"

Startled and amazed, she jerked up from his breast, clutched his arms with fierce hands. The eyes that blazed into his were those of a cornered puma.

"Good God! Linc, what are you saying? A wife!"

"That's—what I said—Kit," he replied haltingly.

"Are you separated from her?"

He uttered a grim little laugh. "Separated. I should smile I am."

"Could you get rid of her?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"Well. That is the only thing I didn't think of," she replied, still obviously shaken. "I don't know that it makes so much difference to me at the moment. Of course I wanted to be your wife and by the high heavens, I swear I will be! . . . I will go right on making my plans. All that matters to me is that you don't despise me—that you care a little for me. The rest will all come in time . . . But what you have told me has shocked all the plans I had right out of my head."

"Kit, if you think that this was easy for me either you are very much mistaken." Putting his head out of the window, Lincoln called up to the driver to stop. When the stage rolled to a standstill Lincoln called: "Lucy, climb down. I want to change places with you."

Laughingly she complied. "All right with me," she said. "I'm about blown to pieces. Did you notice how fast we went down that last hill?"

Lucy entered the stagecoach and

slammed the door. The stage lunged on again.

"Must have been making good time, driver," said the cowboy.

"Wal, where hev you been anyhow?" he chuckled. "Here's the head of Sweet-water Valley, that is, this west fork. Thirty miles more or less to the Bandon ranch. We'll be there in two hours."

It developed that Kit had not left any word with her foreman as to the time he could expect her return, so the driver good-naturedly turned off the main road and took the valley thoroughfare down to the Bandon ranch. Lincoln noticed the picturesque bridge and river and ranch house again with poignant feelings. Beautiful as the spot was, it was haunted for Lincoln; something had taken place there that he might never discover and which he almost hoped would remain forever a secret. The stage rolled up to the gate with dragging brakes.

"Wal, hyar we are," the driver called down cheerily.

Lucy turned toward the house, and from the porch called back at him, archly: "Adios, Mr. Bradway. I enjoyed your company very much—what little I saw of you." Then she picked up two of the bags and entered the house.

"Well, what kind of a speech was that?" queried Kit. "What's the matter with the girl? Jealous, I suppose."

"Didn't strike me that way," returned the cowboy. "I think she was poking fun at me."

"All aboard," called the driver, now a little impatiently, taking up his reins. "We've got to get to South Pass before dark."

"Lincoln, it was a sort of wonderful trip—wasn't it?"

"I should say it was," replied Lincoln. "Good-by, Kit."

"Good-by. Will you come down to see me soon or shall I have to come to South Pass to find you?" she asked with a sharp glance which revealed that she had not yet recovered from the shock of the cowboy's revelation.

"I don't know what to say to that," replied Lincoln evasively. "I've got lots to do. Let's not be in too much of a hurry about seeing each other again."

"This is Thursday," said Kit. "I'll be over in town not later than Saturday. I've got business to settle up there in connection with the sale of the place. Don't forget what I told you about Emery."

From there on the horses made fast time over the hard road. It was dark when they reached the slope leading down into South Pass, and all over the valley lights were twinkling. The driver trotted his team down across the brawling brook, turning into the main street illuminated by oil lamps, to make his scheduled stop at the hotel. Lincoln climbed down stiffly with his bag and packages, peering about him to see if Thatcher and Vince were awaiting him. They were not in sight. It was the early evening hour but the street was already thronged, and the discordant hum of the mining camp's night activity had begun. The Nebraskan hurried away toward his lodging-house. The landlady let him in with a welcoming word and he hurried to his little room to light the lamp.

"Glad to get back, lady," said Linc. "Seems like I've been gone for ages."

"Well, Mr. Bradway, you weren't gone so long that word didn't have time to come back to South Pass about your doings."

"Yes," Linc replied. "This place is not the only place where things can happen."

"Have you talked to anybody?" she asked.

"Not a word with anyone."

"It's been tolerable lively here to-day," she said crisply. "Bud Harkness rode in on the warpath."

"Oh, he did?" queried Bradley with quickened interest.

"I didn't see him, but I talked with those who did. He rode in without saddle or bridle and he didn't have a coat or a shirt to his back. And I hear that his back was a sight to see! Hargrove and Nesbit were in town with some other cattlemen. I heard they had a secret important meeting and then went out and got drunk. They were having a big gambling game at Emery's, when Harkness suddenly appeared on a new horse. He had found some clothes and he went into Emery's holding a gun in each hand. I heard the row from here. Don't know how many shots. According to reports he ran afoul of Emery and his henchmen, one of whom he killed. I don't know which. Then he broke up that poker game, crippling Nesbit, and killing Hargrove. After that Harkness was seen to ride out of town up the hill road toward Casper."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cowboy-Cattleman Feud

DEEP in thought, Bradley left his lodging-house and warily walked toward the main street, keeping in the shadow of the buildings. He went around the back way and up to the livery stable. There was a light in Headly's little office but he did not seem to be

in. Lincoln had taken only a few steps in that direction when Vince and Thatcher appeared out of the shadows.

"Howdy, boss," Vince greeted him. "Shore am glad to see you. I was wait-in' when the stage come in, but I didn't want to show myself."

"Hello, Bradley," spoke up Mel Thatcher. "Reckon I'm just as glad as Vince to see you."

"What's all this I hear?" queried Lincoln sharply, but in a low voice. "My landlady tells me there's been hell a'poppin' today."

"There shore was," said Vince. "Boss, come back in here where we won't be seen."

They went into the hay-scented gloom of the livery stable. Vince extinguished his cigarette with his fingertips.

"I hope you fellows didn't get mixed up in it," said Lincoln.

"Not so anyone would notice it," replied Vince. "Mel an' I was downtown all day snoopin' around—an' shore it's been an important day—an' we seen Harkness ride in acrost the brook. He was bareback and half-naked. You could see the red stripes all over him. He rode up the hill as far as here. Figgerin' there was hell to pay, Mel an' me split up. He stayed downtown an' I hurried up to Headly's the back way. I found Harkness up here foam-in' at the mouth. He had learned from Headly about Hargrove and his rancher pards bein' in town an' whoopin' it up. 'Vince,' he said, 'I'm on my way, but I've got a little job to do before I slope. I've got to hev a gun an' a hoss an' some clothes.' I told him thet he'd come to the right guy. I gave him my shirt an' my old coat an' thet new gun you got me an' the old one you left here an' I also gave him all the money

I had. He made a deal with Headly for a saddle hoss an' saddle, an' I'm bound to say Headly was a friend in need. I asked Bud what he was goin' to do. Boss, you never seen a man burn an' spit fire like that hombre did. 'Wouldn't it be a good idee to wait till after dark?' I asked him. 'Wait nothin'. I'm rarin' to go.'

"Then I said, 'Bud, I guess it's all right fer me to tell you thet me and Thatcher, soon as we found out about yore bein' taken prisoner, rode hell fer leather down into the valley an' were lucky enough to find thet camp near Hargrove's ranch. We saw them men lead you into the brush and we folered. We sneaked up on the campfire where they had you tied an' I hate to tell it, Bud, but we saw them beat you.' 'The hell you did!' said Harkness, amazed. 'Wal, I reckon I couldn't hev had better witnesses for thet dirty deal. But thet wasn't nothin', Vince. They tied me up in a cellar an' starved me to make me talk. About noon today I slugged a guard an' ran away, luckily freein' my hands. I caught a hoss an' hyar I am . . . I'm goin' to slope. If I stayed hyar I'd lead a bunch of cowboys against them cattlemen an' you know, Vince, thet would drag you an' Thatcher in with me. Much obliged fer the good turn yore doin' fer me. I hope to God somebody will do the same fer you someday. Don't follow me now an' get yoreself in trouble.' He forked his hoss an' went plin' down the street. I reckon thet I'd better take his advice an' stay out of sight."

"Are you sure, Vince, that your helpin' hand in this will not come to light?" asked Linc anxiously.

"Shore I am," replied Vince. "No one seen me, an' Headly won't tell."

"It'd be a bad thing for us to get

mixed up in this," said Lincoln seriously. "Come on—what happened then?"

Thatcher took up the story. "I was standing in front of Emery's with some other hombres when Bud came riding down," he said. "He scattered the gravel all over us as he halted the horse. And if a cowboy ever looked dangerous Harkness sure did then. He pulled two guns and bolted into the hall. The other fellows ran but I had to see what was going to happen next. It seems that Emery and that big black-bearded man of his, Bannister, is his name, were standing right there. I figured afterward that they were keeping curious people out of the gambling den where the big game was going on. 'Get out of here, cowboy,' yelled Emery. Bud told him to move pronto. Emery used poor judgment here because evidently he took Bud for a drunken cowboy throwing a bluff and he ordered Bannister to throw him out. That cost Bannister his life and Emery, waking up a little late, ran to the door just in time to save his own life. I learned afterward that Bud's bullet took him in the rump, making a nasty but not a dangerous wound. The gun shots stopped all the noise in the place and Bud ran into the gambling alcove. I was taking a risk but I had to see that too, so I stuck my head around the door jamb. Harkness yelled at them like a mad man. There were six men in the game and the table was loaded with liquor and money. 'Hargrove, you—! I wouldn't talk for you before but I'll talk now,' cut out Harkness fiercely. 'If I did steal a few mavericks from you I shore didn't deserve the outrage you brought upon me. Ranchers like you will have all the cowboys in the valley up in arms. Bad as I was you were worse. When this thing comes

out as it is bound to do you and Lee won't stand very well in this country. Now take this for your part of the dirty work!" And he shot Hargrove through the heart."

"So help me heaven, Thatcher, Bud called the turn!" exclaimed Lincoln. "It looks like war!"

"Yes, and that is nothing to what is going to happen," went on Mel huskily. "Hargrove is a heavy man and he fell over on the table, uptipping it. Glass and money and chips slid off with a crash. The other gamblers made a mad scramble to get away. But Nesbit, as he got up, pulled his gun. That was all he could do before Bud filled him full of lead. They say he hasn't got very much chance for his life. Then Harkness ran out, mounted his horse and rode out of town."

"Well, he got even, didn't he?" exclaimed Bradway, darkly. "I wouldn't be one to judge him, but you know what this will precipitate, don't you, Mel?"

"It means war unless the cattlemen lay off the cowboys."

"Come on, men. Let's go down and get supper. I'm starved," said Linc.

They went down the dark cross street, passed the infrequent yellow lights to the restaurant where they usually ate.

"Vince," said the Nebraskan, speaking low, "we'll have to be a little careful about how we get some more hardware for you."

"I was thinkin' of thet," said Vince.

"Guns are easy to buy in this town," spoke up Thatcher. "All we need is the mazuma."

"Tomorrow is time enough," returned Lincoln.

"Boss, hev'n't you anything to tell us?" asked Vince.

"Nothing much. The ride over from the Springs passed without incident. At least, the passengers seemed to behave themselves," added Lincoln with a short laugh.

Conversation was interrupted then by the arrival of their supper.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Thatcher.

"Split up and walk around town and keep our eyes and ears open. What was that cattleman meeting about, do you suppose?"

"I couldn't find out," replied Thatcher. "I've a hunch the cattlemen have not been having an easy time deciding what steps they are going to take. Some of them would be on the cowboys' side if they dared open their mouths. Lee is the hardest shelled one of the outfit. It's a good thing he wasn't here to day or he would have got his, too. That leaves him boss of the rebel cattlemen. There are not enough of them to run the cowboys out of the country. This mess today will make them leery of mistreating any more cowboys. In my opinion a good many of the cattlemen will want to back out now if Lee will let them. It's a good bet though, that any more meetings they hold will be down in the brush."

"Well, I'll sleep on it," spoke Lincoln thoughtfully. "But I'm inclined to believe that the solution to our own problem is down there in the thick of it."

"After this row kicked up today a feller's life won't be worth two bits if they ketch him snoopin' around down there," said Vince.

"We won't make any false moves. Now you two hombres go around and hear what you can hear. I'll take a look for myself. In the morning I'll meet you and we'll have breakfast. Then I'll buy some more guns and shells. Here's

some money, Vince: use your head now. This trail is getting pretty hot."

In front of Emery's place there was a crowd of two dozen or more. Lincoln backed up against the wall where the light could not strike him, and listened. There was a good deal of talk among individuals who seemed to have interests other than cattle running. One burly fellow with a white apron, evidently a barkeeper, was holding forth at a great rate.

"Bannister just croaked a few minutes ago," he said. "He was conscious till the last. He cussed Emery somethin' awful for sickin' him on that cowboy. Emery is in there cussin' just as bad 'cause the doctor hadn't had time to get to him. He's not shot up much but he bled like a stuck pig. He'll have to do his gamblin' standin' up for a while."

"Four men shot," added another speaker. "Looks as if Emery is the only one who'll pull through and he's the one that should have got it."

"That's sure right," said another. "Emery is about played out in this man's town."

"Did anybody hear what made this cowboy run hell-bent for election?"

"Reckon it was just plain bad whisky."

"I've had a heap to do with cowboys in my day and this feller's work did not bear the earmarks of likker," said a bald-headed man. "Bert Adams was comin' out of the saloon when the cowboy run into him. His guns were smokin'. Bert said he never seen such eyes in any human bein'. He sure wasn't drunk. You can always tell when a feller's under the influence of drink. That cowboy was under the influence of somethin' pretty damn awful."

"I wonder what will come of it?"

They continued talking, and present-

ly Lincoln left his post and entered the building. He peered into the saloon and discovered that business was going on as usual. Groups of drinkers were lined up at the bar; a gambling session was going full blast in the room where the shooting had taken place. In the large room the roulette and monte tables were also occupied. Linc strolled to the wide saloon door and entered. He noticed five cattlemen drinking at the far end, and simulating a man rather the worse for liquor, slid along the bar until he drew reasonably close to them. He called for a drink. One of the cattlemen looked as though he had seen the Nebraskan before but could not place him; all of them evidently were laboring under suppressed emotion. Lincoln heard one whisper hoarsely: "We've gone about it in a wrong way. Lee was right. These thieving, murdering cowboys need to be handled openly."

A second, whose back was turned toward Lincoln, said, "Another deal like Hargrove's and there'll be war!"

"Wal, why not? The cowboys on this here range are ruined forever. Let's drive them out of the country."

"Men," spoke up a tall rancher, "we're split on that from the beginning. I lean toward Lee's idea. There won't be many of us, but we'll mean business and if we carry out Lee's plan this cursed festering sore down in the Sweetwater will be cured forever."

"Impossible," whispered another cattleman with a violent gesture. "That way's unthinkable. I am from the South."

"So is Lee from the South and he says it's absolutely the only thing that can be done."

"We doubt it. I'll gamble he can't get a score of cattlemen in the whole valley to see it his way."

"If the cowboys got wise to that they'd clean us out. I tell you every cowboy in this valley is rank poison."

"Well, one way or another it's a bloody mess. Let's wait until Lee calls his secret meeting next week. This shooting of Hargrove and Nesbit has brought the pot to a boil."

The cattlemen filed out past Linc who was hunched over the bar. He left his liquor untouched and presently made his way outside. Once out of the *Leave It* he was careful to keep in the shadows and to give the cattlemen a wide berth.

That evening Bradway came to the decision that he would ride to the Bandon ranch, hide in the brush and watch at night to see if he could unveil the mystery that he was sure centered about that part of the valley. Apparently the situation concerned a matter of honor with these cowboys involving principals that they would die before betraying. Yet he felt somewhat guilty at the idea of spying on Kit Bandon. If he failed to uncover any vital information then he must in some way induce Lucy to tell him all she knew, even if it necessitated his swearing to her that he would take no action, no matter whom her confession involved. He had five days before his momentous appointment with Lucy; during that time he should be able to find out a great deal. He debated the idea of bringing Vince and Thatcher with him, but concluded that it would be better if he went alone this time. If the cattlemen should happen to run across Thatcher and Vince down among the willows they would suspect something was afoot among the cowboys. He did not think he ran any great risk in attempting it by himself, even though any

cowboy, local or strange, would be under suspicion if caught riding down by the river. His cogitations were interrupted by the return of Vince and Mel. They did not see him until he spoke.

"Howdy, gents. What's the good word?"

"It wasn't so good," replied Vince. "Lot of talk by different people who were in the dark about what come off. All of them speculatin' on a fight between the cowboys an' the cowmen."

"Didn't you hear a word as to *why* the cattlemen beat up Harkness?"

Vince said no, but his boss was not too sure that he was telling the truth.

"How about you, Mel? What did you run across?"

"Lot of gab—no sense to it at all," replied Thatcher, shortly.

"A lot of help you hombres are," retorted the Nebraskan. "You cowpokes must all have thought a hell of a lot of Kit Bandon."

Vince spat out his cigar and sat down without a word.

"Don't you?" queried Thatcher quietly.

Linc cracked his fist in his palm. "I deserved that one! I did and I do. I guess we're all keeping something under our hats."

"All O.K., boss. We savvy what a tough place this is fer you. Git Lucy and ride with us to hell out of this damn country!"

"We can't do it. For one thing I'm locoed on this Wyoming country. And I don't expect to see Lucy till next Wednesday. You hombres are going with me. She wants to show me the most beautiful ranch site in the West. It's a valley up at the source of the Sweetwater."

"Boss, you goin' to settle down hyar permanently?" asked Vince.

"Yes, and by golly, you fellows are going to be here with me," retorted Bradway. Then he reported to them in detail the conversations he had heard along the street. They made no comment until he included the conversation among the cattlemen in the saloon.

"By God, Mell I had a hunch about that," Vince said hoarsely. "I had figured that all along."

Thatcher's response was a quick nod of affirmation.

"I reckon I gotta go bore Lee an' do it quick," muttered Vince.

Linc jumped to his feet and confronted the two angry cowboys.

"What'n the hell has got into you fellows? I won't let you make outlaws of yourselves like Harkness did. You promised to throw in with me—to stick with me. I see big cattle prospects for us in this valley. No matter what your reason, you couldn't be justified in shooting Lee. Now I want a showdown from both of you."

Thatcher spoke up first. "It's not so easy to do, Bradway—but I give you my word of honor that I'll try to see this thing your way."

"Wal, me too, boss," added Vince, somewhat mollified. "I lost my temper. Jest overlook it, pard. I will be all right."

"Much obliged, boys. You had me worried for a minute," said their boss. "I'll be gone tomorrow and maybe Saturday and Sunday. But I'll see you in the morning and we'll buy that hardware. You hombres stay in town and keep out of mischief. Kit Bandon will be in town Saturday and, between you and me, she's going to break with Emery. You might be lucky enough to hear what comes off. Well, I'm pretty tired and I think I'll hit the hay."

Next morning he found his friends

waiting for him at the Chinese restaurant. After breakfast the three men went to the general store and while Lincoln stocked up on needed supplies for himself he gave the others money to buy what they needed. Returning to his lodgings, Lincoln considered his next action. He had planned to go down to the valley that night and scout around.

By midafternoon his plans were set. Headly was at the livery stable when he arrived, but his cowboy friends were not in evidence. He mounted his horse and set out across the open lots toward the creek.

It was approaching dusk. By the time Lincoln had topped the long slopes that led to the pass the road that zigzagged into the valley was in darkness. He rode more and more slowly as he approached the edge of the plateau. After a quick glance down into the black gulf below he halted, abruptly.

Dismounting, he stood there staring down into the mysterious depths of that great valley. Here and there he perceived pin points of light, flickering vaguely. One of those faraway lights was the Bandon ranch. Quickly he mounted and spurred his horse down the road.

Less than a mile from the bridge which led to the Bandon homestead he came to the willows and searched carefully for a spot to tether Bay. Then he took off his spurs and set out toward the ranch house on foot.

When he reached the open again he skirted the edge of the willows near the ranch. Every few paces he would stop to listen. It would be moonlight shortly; and by that time he wanted to be safely hidden near the maverick corral. He listened, but no close sound broke the cool stillness of the night

Warily he crossed the bridge and, keeping to the shadow of the trees along the river, made a wide detour that brought him up behind the corrals. When he reached the long line of sheds, the moon topped the valley wall and shone upon the roof of the white homestead.

Lincoln cautiously moved on in the shadows until he came to the shed that opened out upon the maverick corral. Waiting until his eyes could discern objects in the darkness, he entered the shed. He made sure of his location by peering out of the window. He recognized the bleached pole fence and high gate.

It grew light enough in the shed for Linc to make his way about. He found a seat close to the wall in the deepest shadow where he could not be seen, yet could watch any activities that might be taking place. Then with a sigh he settled back to wait.

Time dragged. Perhaps an hour passed by, though it seemed an age. Suddenly he recognized the sound of horses' hoofs. Then they ceased. Presently he heard the faint metallic clink of a spur. Then he heard the squeaking, complaining noise of wood rubbing against wood—the opening of the corral gate.

Peering out, Lincoln espied a shadowy figure letting a calf into the corral. Breathing heavily, the man halted a moment in the open gate. Bradway heard the snaky sound of a lasso being dragged along the ground; then the calf jumped to find he was free and gave an exhausted little bawl. The man went out, closed the gate behind him, and disappeared.

The watcher relaxed from his tense strain. His suspicions were being confirmed; here was a cowboy with a

stolen maverick and he had gone to exact his tribute from the Maverick Queen.

As the moments dragged by he broke out in a cold sweat. In spite of his self-control, he wanted that cowboy back quickly—at once—right now! To his unutterable relief, the cowboy was returning, but this time he was cursing under his breath and making no effort to walk noiselessly. He jerked open the door of the corral. Then the rustler froze in his tracks.

"Well, I'll be—!" he muttered.

The hoofbeats of another horse sounded softly on the ground. Lincoln heard the tussling of a half-choked calf that was evidently being dragged toward the corral. Then came the crunch of boots pounding hard on the gravel.

"Hello, Bert," called the first cowboy in a harsh voice.

"That you, Monte?" came the sharp reply from the darkness.

"You know it's me."

"What the hell are you doin' heah? You said you'd be gone long before midnight."

"I said a lot of things that didn't happen," growled Monte.

The next moment the man called Bert loomed in the silver moonlight dragging a calf over the ground. He stopped at the gate and, loosening his lasso, kicked the calf into the corral.

"Bert, the fire's out."

"Watcha mean?"

"I mean the fire's out as far as Kit Bandon's concerned."

"Cowboy, are you drunk or loco?"

"I ain't nothin' but plain sore. Kit turned me down. She won't take no more mavericks."

"Wal, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Bert. "What's she got agin you?"

"Nothin' at all. She wasn't sore at

me. She's jest changed her mind about buyin' dogies."

"Hang around a little bit," retorted the other. "I'll betcha two bits she won't turn me down."

"Say, Bert Rawlins, you shore do hate yoreself. I'll bet you my saddle and gun and spurs she does turn you down."

"Yore on, Monte. Don't get tired waitin' for me neither." And with that he strode off into the silvery gloom.

Lincoln lay there almost afraid to breathe. He had been almost ready to believe that Kit Bandon had lied to him. Now if the second rustler returned with her refusal to accept any more stolen livestock then he would know that she had told him the truth. Suddenly the other cowboy loomed up.

"Got a smoke, pard?" he asked huskily.

"Got the makin's heah. Bert, you didn't stay very long."

"Ha! Why should I? She came at my first call. She told me the deal for mavericks was off. I argued with her. She was reasonable and patient with me, tried to make me think she regretted our deals in the past. Thanked me for what I'd done for her but thet kinda talk didn't go with me. 'That may be all right, Kit,' I said, 'but I've done my part. You pay me *now*!' By God! she said 'No!' I cussed her good and then she flashed a gun on me. 'I owe you nothing, Bert Rawlins. I paid you for every cow you ever stole. Run along now or I'll shoot your leg off.' And I shore ran."

"Can you beat thet? What's happened to Kit Bandon all of a sudden?"

"Monte, I didn't know that woman any more. What will become of me now? I jest lived on the hope of seein' this woman—of hearin' her voice—of—"

"Wal, pard, you ain't holdin' the sack all by yoreself. Come on, let's rustle out of heah."

"What'll we do with the calves?"

"Leave the gate open. They'll wander out into the sage."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Spying

THE Nebraskan arose from his cramped position and stretched himself. Emerging from the shed he stood in the shadow, considering his next move. The full moon was bright. Passing along the shed he came to the ranch fence which reached from the corrals to the house. Suddenly a wild idea flashed into his mind: why not call Kit out himself? Why not impersonate a third cowboy and see for himself what Kit's reaction would be? If she refused to deal with him, then he would be certain that she had put her unscrupulous past behind her.

Like a skulking Indian he glided stealthily along the fence to the yard. The gate was open; he passed through and in a short moment reached the deep shadow of the ranch house. Here he paused again to listen. The night was very still; stars were sinking in the west.

He glided along the house again, presently gaining an open window no higher than his head. He gave a start as his sharp eyes recognized Lucy's sombrero and scarf on the window sill. Acting upon sudden impulse, he made up his mind to awaken Lucy, but by calling Kit's name. Putting his head over the sill, and not forgetting to disguise his voice, he called low: "Kit, wake up!"

He heard a sudden movement, then a low, angry, voice. "Go away, cowboy. This is not Kit's room."

It was Lucy's voice. He whispered, "Lucy, it's Lincoln. Come here to the window."

He heard a gasp, then the flinging aside of bed covers and the soft pad of bare feet on the floor. In a moment more she appeared at the window.

"Am I dreaming or plain crazy?" she whispered. "Is it you, Lincoln?"

"Yes. Don't be frightened, Lucy. It's all right."

"Oh, but what in the world are you doing here?"

"Wait. Where's Kit's room?" he asked.

"It's on the other side of the house. The living-room is between hers and mine."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't want her to catch me." He took hold of Lucy's trembling hands. "I tell you, don't be scared. I came out here to do a little reconnoitering. I hid until I had found out what I wanted to know—that Kit Bandon wasn't going to buy any more stolen mavericks. I decided to call Kit myself and pretend to be another cowboy, bringing a stolen maverick. I want to be certain that she has had a change of heart in case I ever have to defend her against the cattlemen."

"Oh, Lincoln, I know she has changed," murmured Lucy excitedly. "It's too good to be true. She talks of leaving the Sweetwater Valley soon."

"That's wonderful," whispered Bradway. "Now, Lucy, I will go round on the other side and call her the same as those other cowboys did. I'll pretend to be another cowpoke who's a stranger to her. I'll say I stole a calf and brought it to her. Then we'll see."

"Lincoln, be terribly careful. If she learns who you are and thinks you were spying on her she'll shoot to kill."

"I will. But I'm in no hurry. It's sweet to be here with you like this," he whispered. And pulling her face down he kissed her.

She was breathless, but far from unresponsive in her return of his caress. Tearing himself away from her clinging arms he slipped silently away among the shadows. At the end of the house under the shade of the trees he halted to compose himself.

There was only one window on that side, half-observed by the shade of a tree a couple of steps outside the wall. It was open. Lincoln went to the edge of the window and called in: "Kit Bandon!"

He heard her stir in her bed. "What? Who?" she asked. "Is that you back again, Bert Rawlins?"

"No, it ain't Rawlins," drawled Lincoln. "Come over to the window." He stepped back into the shadow of the tree, hiding his face with his sombrero. She was slow to reach the window and lean out. He heard the thump of a gun on the window sill.

"Who are you?" she called, peering hard at him.

"I'm a stranger," replied the Nebraskan. "Orville Stone lately come to Sweetwater. Ridin' fer Perkins down the river."

"Yes, and what do you want?" demanded Kit.

"I was tipped off by a cowboy friend."

"Did you meet any other cowboys 'round here?"

"Yes. Two of them, but they didn't see me."

"Well, hurry and state your business."

"I've brought you a maverick."

"I don't want it," replied Kit sharply.

"Why not? I was given to understand—"

"I've changed my mind. I'm not taking any more mavericks from cowboys."

"But lady, I heard diff'runt. I've took a damn big risk! I wisht you could make an exception in this case," he pleaded.

"Oh, I don't blame you. It's a rotten deal. Did I ever see you?"

"No, but I've seen you three times an' I'm afraid them three times has jest about throwed me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—well, I'd like fer you to let me come acourtin' now an' again. I've fallen purty hard fer a cowpoke, ma'am."

"That is worse and more of it," replied Kit with a note of weary regret. "I'm to blame for this. I'm sorry. Whoever told you was honest enough. Won't you let me off this deal?"

"I don't see why I should. It's a deal jest as much as if you asked me to come hyah."

"Oh, I realize that's true. But you see, I've gone out of this business. I won't take another maverick from any cowboy."

"But *why*, Miss Bandon?" the man in the shadows whispered eagerly. "I acted in good faith. The way I see it you owe it to me to take this maverick off my hands."

"Why?" she flashed angrily. "You don't know it, but I've prayed God to forgive me for enticing you boys to steal mavericks. Something has happened to me which has changed my heart and mind. Now, cowboy, that's saying' a lot to a stranger. You talk like a gentleman. Be one and spare me—"

"Woman," interrupted the cowboy in a nasty tone. "Will you keep your word?"

"No, damn you! Not even if I have to kill another man!"

Bradway stood in silence for a moment. What he had hoped and prayed for was true. Then speaking once more in his natural voice, he said: "Kit, be careful what you do with that gun."

"My God!—*who* are you?"

"It's Linc Bradway, Kit. Forgive me for playing this trick on you."

She dropped the gun outside the window and fell forward against the sill to bow her head. "Oh, Lincoln, you've found me—out," she whispered heart-brokenly.

Lincoln stepped forward and recovered the gun. He stood up close to her. "But not too late, Kit," he whispered.

She raised herself up and rested her chin on her bare arms. In the moonlight she seemed transcendently beautiful. Her face was as white as her nightgown. Her great dark eyes were wide and tragic.

"What do you feel for me—now?" she demanded wonderingly.

"I feel a great respect for a woman who can do what you have done."

"But how could you? I've done all the things you suspected me of, Linc."

"Because you are a changed woman and I am glad. Kit, I respect you for the strong—"

"Oh, Lincoln, respect is something—but even a little love would be—" and she reached for him with her bare white arms.

Lincoln did not resist her embrace.

"Darling, if you could love me, even a little—would you leave this country with me?"

"I can't, Kit. I told you. I'm a married man."

"But you have saved my soul," she protested.

"Kit, listen," he began earnestly. "That's all very well about saving your soul, but I want to save your good name—you and your niece from disgrace—and hope of happiness—certainly your freedom and perhaps your life."

She was startled. "My—my life!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe that is an exaggeration," went on Lincoln hurriedly, "but I'm worried. A terrible flare-up between the cowboys and the cattlemen has broken out. The cattlemen do not present a united front. They've split. But there's one faction that is for revenge. I don't know who they are but Lee is at the head of it. Only his infatuation for you kept him from sending you to jail—or worse. Lee has enough on you to hang you."

"But Lincoln, it can't go on. I'm through. I will never steal mavericks again. This turndown of Monte and Rawlins will spread over the valley like wildfire."

"But my dear, it may be too late," he whispered.

"Oh, no, Lincoln, I'm sure you're wrong. I can handle the situation. I'll make amends in whatever way I can. I'll break with Emery. I'll find some way of placating these bitter enemies of mine."

"All that takes time, Kit," said Bradway earnestly.

"I will be in town tomorrow or Sunday," said Kit. "Go now, Lincoln, so that you'll get back to town before daylight. I wouldn't want it known that you had been here."

She kissed him good-by and pushed him away from the window. He laid her gun on the sill. Then he wheeled and ran out under the trees to the road.

He reached the edge of the willows where he had tethered his horse, mounted, and was soon out upon the valley bottom. As he rode he tried to recapture the glow that his short whispered conversation with Lucy had stirred in him, also the new feeling of respect and admiration for the Maverick Queen.

There still were some things he had to know. In that respect the night's adventure had not been completely successful. Jim Weston's murder had taken place on this very ranch. Kit had not admitted it, but she had admitted to the responsibility for "several cowboys' deaths."



It was late Sunday morning before he left his room again. It was the usual noisy, busy day, little different from any other day in this mining town. At noon he visited the Chinese restaurant, hoping to meet Vince or Thatcher there. The waiter informed him that they had been in early that morning. By three in the afternoon there was still no sign of them. Then he lost no time getting back to the livery stable. Headly was in his office and told him, "They hain't been back since early mornin'. Did you notice that the town is full of cowboys?"

"No, I didn't," replied Lincoln. "What does that mean?"

"I'll be switched if I can call the turn on that," said Headly. "There are too blamed many of them for a Sunday off."

"Are there any more cattlemen in town than usual?" asked Lincoln.

"Whar are yore eyes, cowboy? I've got five buckboards and two spring wagons in the backyard now, and hain't got room for no more teams."

"Did you see Kit Bandon's buckboard?"

"Nope. I reckon she hain't come along yet."

Lincoln sat down to wait. He wanted very much to go back downtown, yet he wanted to avoid tangling with Emery's crowd for the present. He would wait until the boys arrived. They strayed in at last, their faces tight-lipped and set.

"I suppose you fellows are hungry as usual?" Lincoln asked.

"Starved to death," vowed Vince.

"We were too busy to think of dinner."

"Busy at what?" queried Lino.

"Tryin' to find out what the hell was goin' on down there."

"All these cowboys and cattlemen got you kind of lathered up, eh?"

"It's pretty interestin', boss. Mel has his idee an' I hev mine. We'll let you do yore own figgerin'."

"All right. Let's go eat," replied Bradway shortly.

They went downtown. Lino had not seen so many pedestrians, so many saddle horses, or so many vehicles since he had come to South Pass. Ordering dinner, they ate in silence. At length Thatcher, bending over to light a cigarette, puffed a huge cloud of smoke and spoke from behind it.

"Boss, Vince and I have been snooping around for two whole days and nights. I had the luck to find myself sitting pretty with a dance-hall girl, and I was upstairs in the little parlor with her when Emery came limping along the hall with Kit Bandon. That was today about one o'clock. I could see from behind the curtain.

"I tell you, Kit," said Emery, "I won't oppose your splitting with me here but I can't pay you for your share."

"And why not?" snapped Kit.

"I haven't got the money."

"You're a liar," said Kit.

"To tell you the truth, Kit, I'm in bad here in South Pass. I've been forced to pay debts. Some of the men I owed money to living right here in town talked damn queer. One of them said I had to be careful or I'd be run out of town. That's honest, Kit. These men have all been heavy losers at my game and they're sore."

"I'm sore too," Kit replied. "Dig up part of the money anyhow to pay me for what I invested in your gambling deal!"

"Emery looked worried. 'I'll do my best to oblige you. But does that mean you want to split on our cattle business down in the valley also?'"

"That's exactly what I mean," Kit said. "But never mind that until later."

"Well, you'll find me tough on that proposition," he retorted angrily. "You've been treating me mean and now you make up your mind in five minutes to quit me cold. You act as though I was contaminated. Well, I won't do it! You're bright enough, Kit Bandon, to know that I have a pretty good hold on you!"

"Yes, I'm bright enough to know that you've always been a double-crosser. Furthermore, you have no hold on me!"

"Listen, Kit. This place is getting hot for you as well as for me. Suppose I talked?"

"I've shot men for less than that. Think it over. We split right here."

Thatcher paused for breath. "Boys, you should have seen her look at him.

If eyes could kill he would have been done for right then. Then she left him and ran downstairs. Emery limped back to his room and I wouldn't be surprised if sooner or later they find Emery very neatly bored through the middle."

"Well!" exclaimed the Nebraskan under his breath. "There sure is something doing in this mining camp."

"Aha!" ejaculated Vince. "You only said the half."

"Boys, I'm glad to know about this Emery business," said Linc earnestly, "for I know that Kit Bandon is going straight. This break with Emery is the fourth proof I have of it. She will never take any more stolen mavericks from rustling cowboys."

Vince stared at him. Thatcher, hardly less impressed than his comrade, replied:

"By God! You know, I'm not surprised. Kit could do that!"

"Boys, I'll have more to tell you by and by," went on Lincoln. "What I want to do now is find out what all these cowboys are doing in town."

Vince leaned over and whispered, "Pard, the cowboys are talkin' about what the cattlemen are up to."

"Will these cowboys talk to me?" the Nebraskan asked.

"Not likely, but you can try," replied Mel.

"I'll tell you, boss, if they don't ride out tonight it means they've quit their jobs and that's jest one hell of a thing. Cowpokes on the loose are jest so much dynamite."

"We'll have to have a try," said Linc. "We'll approach every cowboy that we can get to. If we can fill one full of liquor he may talk."

"Sure, boss," replied Thatcher, "but the queer deal is that these cowboys are not drinking a single damn drop."

Vince suggested, "Pard, we might find one cowboy who's goin' to slope who'd give the deal away if we paid him enough. That is if he really knows what they're goin' to do. I don't believe anyone knows."

"Vince, you ought to know if anybody knows," said Lincoln.

"Shore, I ought. But I'm afeerd to believe what I think."

"Afraid!" exclaimed Lincoln. "What are you afraid of?"

"Figger that one out for yoreself," declared Vince truculently. "Come on, let's mosey along. We're wastin' time."

The two cowboys started in one direction, while Linc set out by himself. He spent three or four hours that night approaching one cowboy group after another. When he tried to get them to talk they showed an impassive and stony aloofness in regard to their presence in town. The Nebraskan stayed out of Emery's gambling hall. About midnight he went back to his lodgings, baffled and not a little worried.

Next morning he found his friends at the restaurant waiting for him. "Anything to tell me, boys?" he asked.

"Boss, this is what come off: Last night the cattlemen, at least some of them, held a secret meeting in the bank in the dark. They must have gone up there by ones and twos and around about, and after they got off the street they wore masks."

"How the devil did you find all this out?" queried Bradway.

"No more about that for the present," replied Thatcher with an odd curtness. "It's my hunch, boys, that the cattlemen will be slipping out of town today."

Later in the morning Linc ran into two clean-cut young riders whose looks he liked.

"Howdy, boys. Will you have a drink this morning?" he asked cheerily.

"Well, we don't care if we do," one of them replied, surprisingly.

The Nebraskan took them into a saloon and bought a round of drinks. "You boys want to talk turkey to me this morning about business?"

"About what business?" asked one, glancing at his partner.

"I'm going to start raising cattle," replied Lincoln, "and I want some good riders. I've located a range about twenty miles out of town, not down in the valley, and I want to put two or three men to work at once. My name is Bradway."

"Sounds good to me 'cause I quit my job on the Sweetwater," replied the one with the tawny hair. "What will the job pay?"

"I'll pay you ten dollars a month more than you've been getting."

"I'm on, mister. Name is Slim Morris. Been ridin' for Higgins in the valley. Gimme a couple of days or so to ride down to the ranch and get my other horse and what stuff I've got."

"Fine, Slim," responded Lincoln heartily. "Be at Headly's livery stable some time Thursday."

"Tom, don't you want to ring in on this, too?" asked Morris, turning to his companion.

"I can't," replied the other. "I've overdrawn a couple of months' wages and I can't quit Sam Blake till I've worked it out."

"Will it square you with Blake if you pay him?" asked Lincoln.

"Well, I reckon it would," rejoined Tom with a smile. "None of Blake's riders have quit on account of this mess-up in this end of the valley."

When he found out from the cowboy

what he owed the rancher, Linc handed the amount over to Tom and told him to come back Thursday with Morris.

"Boys, I feel I've made myself a good deal in getting you to ride for me. Tell me one thing. Haven't most of the cowboys in this locality quit their jobs?"

"That's correct, Bradway. All the cowboys north of the forks on the river have quit their jobs. You can hire as many riders as you want."

"Thanks. That is good news. I'll look around and see if I can find any I like as well as I do you boys."

Their new employer bade them goodbye and went on up the street. He made the rounds of the stores and the saloons and approached perhaps half a dozen more cowboys. He really did not want to hire any more hands, but he used the pretext as an excuse for making himself acquainted.

In the afternoon, when he headed up the street toward the livery stable he noted for the first time that there were no buckboards in sight or any other kind of vehicle. At Headly's livery stable all the conveyances that the ranchers had left there were gone.

Headly said curiously, "They sure sloped out of town mighty sudden."

As soon as Vince and Thatcher arrived they talked at length about this sudden departure.

"Suits me just as well," said Mel enigmatically.

Linc spoke up quickly. "You mean they have split—couldn't agree—don't know what they're going to do—perhaps weakening on whatever they had in mind?"

"Reckon that applies to most of 'em."

Linc told them about the two cowboys whom he had hired to ride for him and named them.

"I know Slim Morris," said Mel.

"Comes from way down the river. Salt of the earth. I don't know the one you called Tom."

Vince said, "Wal, let's go hunt them up and get acquainted."

The following day Linc did not find his comrades until late.

"Boss, hev you noticed anythin' in particular?" asked Vince.

"Not this morning. I've been too busy thinking about tomorrow," replied the Nebraskan, smiling.

"Wal, we're the only cowboys left in this whole damn town."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Lincoln. "Well, you boys are leaving town, too. I'm going to take you with me over to the head of the Sweetwater. You needn't pack anything except a little grub, for we will be coming back tomorrow night. I want to leave about sunrise. We'll head up Rock Creek and go through the miners' diggings to the slope just before the canyon boxes and climb out there. What I particularly aim at is laying out a grade where we can build a road."

"That sure will be fine," declared Thatcher. "New job all by ourselves, a lot of pioneer work, plenty of game to hunt, log cabins to run up—I sure like the prospect."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Valley of the Sweetwater

AT sunrise the next morning Lincoln and his two comrades climbed the slope from South Pass to the summit of the hill. Once on top the eagle-eyed Vince pointed to a buckboard pulled by four horses winding up the road out of town.

"Wonder who that is?" queried Lincoln. "Hitting it up pretty fast on the grade."

They rode on, finding the going fairly easy on top, with a slight upgrade, and straggling bits of brush and pine scattered over the terrain. They kept to a course quartering away from a direct route across the pass. A ride of perhaps five or six miles brought them to the narrow valley of the Sweetwater, which here was merely a wide ravine with shallow slopes choked with green timber so thick that the noisy river could be heard but not seen.

"Well, it's easy enough to grade a road down here," said Bradway. "Boys, I'll go down and take the trail so as to save time. You work along this slope till you come to the valley, then pick out the most suitable place westward to cut the road up to the level."

"Pretty far, I'd say," replied Vince. "I can't see the valley from hyah."

"Well, you can figure on me riding up out of the valley some time this afternoon. You can keep your eyes peeled for me and I'll do the same for you."

The Nebraskan bade them good-by and urged his horse down the slope and into the brush. As he descended, the thickets grew more and more open; presently he reached the level that he had calculated was several hundred yards across to the other slope. He rode out into a well-defined trail, in which he espied fresh pony tracks made no longer ago than that morning. They gave Lincoln an exuberant feeling of happiness. Assuredly these tracks had been made by Lucy's pony swinging along at a good fast lope. He put Bay to a like gait and soon was flying along the cool, shady trail.

Presently the trail rounded a higher eminence on the valley slope, from

which Linc was suddenly confronted by a breath-taking view of the length and breadth of Lucy's wonderful valley. He stopped his horse, gazing spell-bound out over the most beautiful valley he had ever seen in his life.

Its floor was a level area of gold and green, along which meandered a stream shining like a ribbon bordered by willows and low bushes. As far as he could see the valley's steep western slope consisted of gray sage and glistening rock. Now and again he caught glimpses of waterfalls, like white plumes against the blue and gray of the distant palisade.

With one last lingering look Linc set off up the trail again. As he rode along he kept a sharp lookout for Lucy. It was several miles, however, before he caught a glimpse of her. As he gazed upward at the bench his quick eye sighted something red glinting in the sunlight. In another instant he made out Lucy standing out on a rocky eminence waving her red scarf at him. He found a fairly steep trail with two long zigzags leading up to the level bench.

Reaching the level ground he halted Bay there, and as he leaped off he saw Lucy running toward him, her bare fair head shining in the sunlight, the red scarf streaming out behind. Her face was rosy, laughing, sweet.

"Oh, Lincoln," she screamed. "Here you are! In my valley! I saw you—all the way—from the entrance."

He took her in his arms and held her, murmuring over and over again, "My wife, my darling Lucy."

"Tell me quick," she pleaded pantingly. "What do you think—of my—of our valley?"

"I haven't had a good look yet," replied Lincoln, "but from what little I saw it tops any place I ever saw."

"Hurry then and take a hundred looks," she commanded laughingly. "I want to know—if this is to be our home."

"Lucy, I don't have to see any more to decide that. Thatcher and Vince are on the other side somewhere, farther down from here, looking for a place to build a road."

"Oh, we've got all that settled!" she exclaimed.

"We? Who's we?"

"My old trapper friend, Ben Thorpe. His cabin is up here a ways. We'll ride up to see him presently. Come, let me show you where we can build our homestead. See, this bench is level and has about ten or a dozen acres. A wagon road will run straight across the valley from here and up through the only outlet except the gateway through which you entered. Ben says if we fence that gateway, not a head of stock can ever climb out. What do you think of that?"

"It grows more wonderful all the time," responded Lincoln.

"Now come this way," she said, eagerly dragging him by one arm. "Look! There's where our brook comes tumbling out over the rocks and runs around in a circle. Back here it forms a beautiful pool that's actually so crammed with big trout that there's barely room for us to swim in it, even if the water were warm enough, and then it runs across the bench to cascade off the rocks just where you see the pines out there." She finished out of breath, and Linc seized his advantage and kissed her again.

She led him several hundred yards back over the green sage and flower-dotted plateau. The rocky wall extended up rather high from that point in successive ledges and low vine-covered

cliffs, over which an amber stream came tumbling down to enter the circle and pool Lucy had described. Then it emerged, plunged over a little waterfall, and murmured gently out across the bench.

"And Ben Thorpe says this valley is protected in winter," continued Lucy. "It never gets terribly cold as it does out on the pass. We can put in a big garden here, irrigate it, and grow more things to eat than anywhere else in this country."

"You've had that all figured out a long time, haven't you, Lucy?" queried her husband, with a gentle smile.

"Yes, I have. Oh, Lincoln, it's been such great happiness to dream and plan. When do you think we can come up here and start making a home?"

"Lord, I don't know. But soon—I hope soon. We might run off and leave an explanation for Kit, put some men to work here, and then come back. What could she do then, what can she do now?—Lucy, I think the time has come—not to run away, but to face your aunt with the truth and get it over with. After all, *you're* my job now, not solving a mystery which had better remain unsolved."

"Don't ask me. When I think of what she'll do when she finds out—Oh, Lincoln, let's not think about it now. Kit is selling the ranch and the stock she has on hand and she'd determined to leave Wyoming. She still thinks you are going with her."

"Not any longer does she think so! I told her I was a married man, Lucy."

"Oh, you didn't!" she cried, terrified.

"I didn't tell her to whom I was married," he reassured her.

"Lincoln, if we have a honeymoon, I want it to be up here."

"That suits me fine! We could live in

a tent while we were building a cabin." And so they talked for hours, arms about each other, as they walked to and fro over the bench, blissfully oblivious of everything save their cherished hopes and plans for the future.

Finally Lucy said, "Lincoln, I have one more sight to show you: the one I've reserved for the last. But first we must ride up to see Ben Thorpe."

Lincoln secured Bay, and mounting, met her at the upper end of the bench. In a sheltered place close at hand Lucy pointed out the trapper's little cabin. A column of blue smoke rose from the stone chimney; at Lucy's gay call a black dog came bounding toward her and the spare form of the buckskin-clad trapper emerged from the doorway. His visage was lined and weather-beaten, with the clear eyes of the wilderness man.

"Ben, you did not really think I was serious, yesterday," Lucy said laughingly. "But he did come. This is my husband, Lincoln Bradley . . . Lincoln, my friend, Ben Thorpe."

"Wal, young man, is it true you are goin' to throw up a cabin an' homestead this valley?"

Lincoln laughed happily. "Will you be glad to have company?"

"I shore will be," replied the trapper, puffing at his pipe. "It didn't used to be so lonesome but I guess I'm growin' old an' have a hankerin' for human voices an' faces."

"Well," said Lincoln, "let's get down to business. How about a road into this valley? Lucy tells me you have it all figured out."

"Right across there," replied the trapper, rising and pointing. "See that break? We can grade out a road there in a few days."

"How about your working for me?"

asked Lincoln. "I've got four cowboys hired. We can build the road, then two of you can haul in supplies while the others cut and snake down timber for the cabins and corrals. I will pay good wages."

"Never mind the wages, son. I've got four good horses that I've packed for years, but they're broke to a wagon."

"Have you got a wagon and tools?" asked Lincoln.

"No wagon and I'm about out of tools," said Thorpe apologetically. "Son, it'll take a good deal of money to do this thing the way I reckon you would want to."

"I have plenty of money," replied Lincoln cheerfully. "When can you begin?"

"Right away," said the trapper. "Can't start too soon for me."

"That's fine," responded Lincoln, giving Lucy's arm a squeeze. "I'll look for you in town in two or three days. We'll buy two wagons and all the tools they'll hold. Also camp outfits and supplies. We'll work in from the other direction. My four men under your directions can cut the road down the hill and across the valley while I pack in tents, grub, and whatever Lucy and I will need to start our homesteading."

"That's a big order, son," said Thorpe thoughtfully, "but I reckon we'll be up to it."

"Then it's settled!" exclaimed Lincoln. "Sorry we can't make a longer visit, Ben. There's too much to see and talk over, besides I want Lucy to get home before dark."

"Wal, I reckon so. I haven't anything to offer you to eat except elk meat, and I'm out of flour and coffee."

"We've got a bit of lunch with us," said Lucy. "Just think, I will be up here next week for good! Good-by till then, Ben."

Mounting their horses, they rode back toward the bench. Lucy appeared to be in a seventh heaven. But now that the plans were made, Lincoln suffered a sinking sensation in his breast. He could no longer put off the inevitable showdown with Lucy's aunt. And now that he no longer felt the paramount importance of avenging his friend's murder, there was no longer any need to propitiate that beautiful woman.

"Dearest," complained Lucy suddenly, "you aren't listening to me."

"No, I wasn't. I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"I still want to show you that wonderful place I was telling you about—my place, where I used to hope and dream about the future. It's a perfect spot to have our lunch. And I'm hungry—even though I am in love!"

They rode along the bench until they came to a grassy promontory overlooking the valley. Lincoln made a seat for Lucy with his coat and while she spread the lunch, still talking excitedly like a happy child, he took his first look at the valley from that point.

Lucy watched him, happy that he was so thrilled by her beloved spot. The towering mountain range loomed sublime and awe-inspiring in the distance; but the canyons and belts of timber, the waterfalls and stained, weather-beaten cliffs did not seem so aloof; near at hand there were more pastoral scenes; green meadows dotted by elk and moose where he envisioned one day his herd of cattle would be grazing.

A hand crept into his, and suddenly he descended from the clouds. With a start he turned to look at Lucy's sweet face. She met his embraces and caresses with an unrestrained fervor and joy.

Holding her close in his arms, he was taking his last toll of those warm lips when he heard a tinkle of a spur. For a moment he thought it might be one of his or Lucy's, but suddenly his sharp ears caught another sound. He sat bolt upright, and with his hand on his gun turned his eyes toward the aspens. At the same instant he heard what sounded as though it might be the sharp intake of someone's breath.

There before him he saw Kit Bandon, standing not twenty steps away, holding herself rigid between two aspen saplings.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Maverick Queen

LUCY must have felt her companion's violent shock and sudden immobility, for she cried quickly, "What is it, Linc?"

Lincoln stared.

"Ah—Kit," he said hoarsely.

Kit Bandon's face was that of a rattlesnake about to strike. Linc could see that the two little saplings to which she clung were trembling in her grasp. When she let go of them they came together with a violent swish that set the leaves to quaking and dancing.

Kit moved forward slowly as if some great weight were holding her back. She was garbed in a black riding habit which made her look slim and somber. There was a gun in her belt sheath. She was bare-headed, her face white as paste. It was as though she were wearing a mask.

"Why—Kit," began Lincoln haltingly "where did you—come from?"

"I knew you were here," she replied

in a cold, even tone. "Emery came out this morning. He saw you climbing the ridge out of South Pass. Then later he saw Lucy riding up the Sweetwater trail. But I never thought to find this—this."

Lucy uttered a little strangled cry and scrambled to her knees. A burning scarlet wave swept over her face from neck to brow.

Lincoln hastily got up, spurs clinking, boots scraping. He noticed then that Kit wore gauntlets and carried a whip in her hand. She was peering past the cowboy at the kneeling girl.

"You double-crossing little cat," she snarled, her lips writhing.

"Look here, Kit," expostulated Lincoln. "No more of that talk, please. Don't blame Lucy. This is my doing!"

Kit stepped aside from Lincoln to confront Lucy. "So you're the fine decent little girl who wouldn't kiss the cowboys," taunted Kit, her cold, even voice rising. "Look at your face! Look at your hair! Look at your blouse! You—who were so—so damned prudish and proper and horrified when Jimmy Weston—"

"You—you—are mistaken, Aunt Kit," faltered Lucy, her hands going to her open blouse.

"I was mistaken about you, you little alleycat, you—" spat out the raging woman. "Is this the thanks I get for bringing you up, for giving you a home, for—" Suddenly she raised her arm and lashed Lucy across the face with the whip.

Lincoln reached forward and snatched the whip so violently from Kit that her glove came away with it. "Have you gone completely mad?"

Kit paid no heed to him. She still faced the cowering girl. "You wouldn't take a lover from your cowboy

friends," she snarled, her voice gathering passion. "You always threw yourself at mine—now you've made a fool out of the only man I ever cared for."

"It's a lie," cried Lucy rising, white and furious, from her knees. "Everything you said is a lie. I never—Linc and I—"

"You know what I mean, Lucy Bandon. Your innocence! I wonder that I could be so blind."

Lucy stepped forward to confront her aunt, one hand on the red welt across her cheek. "Kit, I didn't betray you. Lincoln Bradway doesn't care anything for you. He never did!"

"You brazen little bitch!" burst out Kit, all control now gone.

"Enough of this, Kit," interrupted Lincoln harshly. "I won't have you abusing my, my—I think it's my turn to talk now."

"Listen, you double-crossing sneaking spy! I'll talk to you when I get through with her."

"That's right, take it out on me if you want, but leave Lucy alone." He put his arm protectingly around his wife, who now was weeping bitterly.

"Leave her alone!" shrieked Kit, beside herself. "Why the dirty little—"

Lincoln slapped her so hard across the lips that it brought blood. The blow staggered her.

"You struck me—for her?"

"Yes, and I'm liable to hurt you worse if you keep on screaming like a madwoman. Lucy is honest. She's done nothing wrong. If there's any blame it's mine."

"Hear the loyal champion. You're as rotten as she is."

"I did come to feel great respect for you, Kit, but I never loved you. I couldn't help it if you imagined things."

"You talk just like every cowboy

caught in the act."

"I tell you I had no love for you such as I feel for Lucy."

"You fling it in my teeth?" shrieked Kit.

"I'm sorry, Kit," he said, "that you have to learn the news in this wise. Lucy and I are married. Lucy is my wife!"

She regarded him as if she had not heard aright or as if he were crazy. "What?" she demanded, utterly incredulous.

"Yes, Kit Bandon," interposed Lucy passionately, "ever since that first day in Rock Springs—when you were so busy with Hank Miller that you left us alone."

"You're both liars," shrieked Kit.

"No, Kit, it's the truth. Look here," cried Lincoln hurriedly. And producing their marriage certificate, which he had always carried, he thrust it before Kit's eyes.

She read it, then gasped. "How? When?"

"Kit, it was early in the evening just about dark while you were so busy with that cattleman," replied Lincoln.

"Was that—the first time—you met?"

"No. I bumped into Lucy in the street the first day I was in South Pass and fell in love with her at first sight."

"And you—Lucy Bandon?"

"It was the same with me."

"Oh, I see," returned Kit, trembling. "But you never told me."

"I asked Lucy to keep it quiet for my sake. It would have been easy to pick up our feet and leave for Nebraska without saying a word to anyone. But I had a job to finish before I could go—"

Kit still faced her niece. "You let me fall in love with this man knowing he was yours! You might have saved me from letting me make a shameless fool

of myself. I can never forgive you for that. You have both wronged me."

"We did not," cried Lucy. "It was your monstrous vanity. It was the same vanity that made you take Jimmy Weston away from me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Kit," interposed Lincoln, giving way to anger. "It is you who have made the blunders. And the worst blunder you made was what you did to Weston."

"Don't throw that lovesick simpleton in my face."

"If he was lovesick you made him so," retorted Lucy. "He *did* care for me. And you, Kit Bandon, are the one who knows what it cost him."

"All right, girl. You know there's no turning back on this trail."

"Yes, I know," responded Lucy. "But I'm no longer afraid of you, Kit Bandon. I can tell you right in front of Lincoln—that Jimmy was bad—that he was faithless—that he deserved punishment—but not a disgraceful cowardly death while he was drunk and asleep."

Kit uttered an inarticulate cry and with face distorted by fear and rage she drew her gun with lightning swift-ness. With a sudden lunge Linc seized the hand that held the gleaming gun and wrenched it upward so that the discharge passed harmlessly over Lucy's head. Lincoln, with both hands on her wrist and the gun, held her arm above her head. She struck with her free hand. She kicked. She writhed and twisted in his grasp. She bit him on the back of the hand.

"I'll kill you, Lucy Bandon, for that," she screamed. "And you, Linc Bradway—I'll blow your guts out!"

"For God's sake, Kit, come to your senses," implored Lincoln. "Drop that gun. Let me have it. *Kit!*"

"I'll kill you! You two can't live on

the earth with me!"

She reached for the gun with her other hand and was straining, panting, writhing with insane strength to tear it away from Lincoln. He could feel her muscular body swell and thrash against him. He gave her gun hand a quick backward twist. She screamed with agony and helpless rage. The gun went spinning beyond over the rock. She fell away from him against the tree and then slid to the ground. She did not move.

"God!" whispered Lincoln. "I guess it was the wrong time—to tell her. Lucy, she would have murdered us both."

"I told you, Lincoln! I *know*—Kit Bandon," replied Lucy, her face white and drawn. She knelt beside the still form and slipped her hand inside Kit's blouse. "Oh, she's alive. Lincoln, get some water in your sombrero."

He snatched up his sombrero and strode to the brook. As he filled the sombrero he noticed how his hands were shaking. He hurried back with the water. Lucy began to bathe her aunt's face with the icy water while Lincoln at Lucy's instigation began to chafe her wrists. Their joint activities brought Kit to.

"What—happened?" she asked faintly, as her eyes went from one to the other.

"We had a fight, Kit, and I had to disarm you," returned Lincoln. "You struck my head when you fell and lost your senses."

"What was I—going to do?"

"Never mind. We want to forget it."

Kit gave a long, heart-rending sigh. "I remember—you and Lucy—love at first sight—never told me—married at Rock Springs. Now what is to become of me?" and she broke into an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

Her hysteria was so prolonged and her sobbing so violent that Linc thought she would do herself some injury, but she could not be comforted. Lucy put Kit's head in her lap and held her and spoke soothingly to the distracted woman. As Linc looked down at her he scarcely recognized the woman that was Kit Bandon. She looked old, and sick, and beaten. She sat up presently, and Lucy helped her to her feet.

"It's getting late," said Lincoln, taking one of her arms. "Kit, do you think you can ride?"

"Yes, I guess I'm all right now," she replied quietly.

"I'll get your horse. And yours, too, Lucy," said Lincoln. And he hurried away to find them.

Kit's horse had wandered off the bench and required a few moments to locate. Upon returning to the grove with the two horses he found both women composed.

"Lincoln—Lucy," Kit Bandon spoke in a flat, dead tone of voice, "it could have been worse. But that was not to be. I'm glad—I don't know just what you said and what I admitted, but I ask you to forget it. Would that be too much?"

"There, there, Kit," replied Bradway earnestly. "Whatever was spoken, or whatever was done here today, shall be forgotten by Lucy and by me."

"Oh, yes," replied Lucy in a low voice. "It is all forgotten—and forgiven. It was an hour of madness."

"Are you sure you can ride?" asked Lincoln.

"I think so. Where's my horse? Let me try." She did not mount so readily, but she appeared to be steady in the saddle and Lincoln calculated that she would be all right.

"Take her home, Lucy," said the Nebraskan. "As long as she's all right I'd rather not go. I'll ride across the valley and climb out on top where I expect to meet the cowboys. I'll be seeing you in a day or two. Good-by, Lucy—Don't take it so hard, Kit. Good-by."

He watched them ride across the bench and down the trail. Soon they broke from a trot to a lope, assuring Lincoln that they would reach home safely.

He climbed down over the rocks and securing Kit's gun put it in his pocket and returned to the level. The day was far spent. Hurrying to his horse, he mounted and rode down off the bench. He found a trail there that led straight across the valley. Crossing the valley in a lope, he reached the summit of the slope and found Thatcher and Vince waiting for him.

Bradway sat down with his back to a tree and wiped his hot face. Then he espied a lean-to made of pine boughs, several blankets thrown over the bushes, a little campfire burning with a coffee-pot boiling, and a skillet heating up. A parcel of food was spread on the ground.

"So you've made camp?" queried Lincoln.

"Shore," replied Vince. "It wasn't no trouble to pack this little stuff an' you never can tell."

"Good idea!" exclaimed the Nebraskan. "We'll stay here all night."

"Shore is the greatest corral for stock I ever seen," said Vince. "All you hev to do is to fence the opening where you come in and build a little fence and a gate down heah where you see it so narrow an' you'll be jake."

"Lino, if you can throw a few cattle in there you'll get rich," said Thatcher thoughtfully.

"You're wrong, boys," responded Linc. "I can throw a big herd of cattle in there and we'll all get rich."



WHEN the three cowboys awoke, the early sun had colored the peaks a soft rose, the pine needles were drifting down on the breeze, and the valley and the lake and the streams below them were shining with the glory of the dawn. To the tall Nebraskan the tragic events of the day before seemed already to have faded into the past.

They broke camp early and set off eastward, searching out the best route for a road among the rocks and the thickets which grew along the hillside toward the Pass. It took them all morning to work down from the rim of the valley to the point where the timber thinned out and failed. From then on the going was less rough down a gradual slope over fairly even ground. Toward the middle of the afternoon they reached the bluff overlooking South Pass. The last miles, leading down the long slope across the brook, they rode; they were thoroughly tired when they reached Headly's stables.

"Wal," suggested Vince, "let's wash up an' mosey down to set an see what's come off since we've been gone."

"O.K., boys," agreed Lincoln, "but it's early yet. So let's head for the big store and buy 'em out. It's good that this is a big store with a full line of hardware. And, Mel, don't forget plenty of carpenter's tools."

"Huh. Talks like he had a gold mine," said Vince. "That stuff is goin' to cost a heap of money."

"We've got plenty, pards, and maybe I'm not glad I saved it! Pile in now and let's do the best trading we can!"

After supper they emerged from the restaurant to find it dark and the lights lit in all the windows. They sauntered down the crowded street, looking—as was their habit—for cowboys and cattlemen; but only miners and the typical disreputable town hangers-on seemed to be in evidence.

"Hey, look there," said Vince, pointing down the street. "Somethin's come off. Biggest crowd I ever seen in front of Emery's."

"That reminds me," returned the Nebraskan. "Emery left South Pass yesterday morning. He saw us climb the hill a little after sunrise. You remember pointing out the buckboard going at a pretty good clip? Well, he saw Lucy riding up the Sweetwater trail and putting two and two together he tipped Kit off to where we were going."

"Emery leavin' to go down the valley must mean a whole lot," said Vince thoughtfully. "Let's find out."

"All right," agreed Lincoln. "Let's split up and ask a few questions; we'll meet later and compare notes."

Linc pushed his way inside the saloon. It was more crowded and noisy than he had ever seen it; gamblers occupied every table, with others awaiting their turn. In the other room a line crowded the bar three deep, drinking and waiting to be served. Bradway noticed that none of the employees of the *Leave It* seemed familiar to him. Finally he found two miners inclined to be somewhat loose-tongued and mellow from drink, who appeared to be willing to talk.

Emery's creditors, big cattlemen from down the valley, one of whom was Kit Bandon, had taken the gambling hall away from him and run him out of town. In a rage at being dispossessed, Emery had sworn vengeance on somebody whose name they didn't know. The rumor persisted that on account of certain shady cattle deals in which he was implicated it might be wise for Emery to quit the valley while the going was good.

After gleaning from his tipsy informants all that was possible, Lincoln went outside to wait for his two partners. He did not have to linger long for Thatcher. The Nebraskan lost no time informing the cowboy of all he had learned.

"I got just about the same story," said Mel. "Emery always was a crooked gambler and it's a wonder he had not been shot long ago. But he stood in with the other gamblers and shared his profits with them. It just happened that no cowboy had been cheated and riled enough to draw on him. But, boss, the people now feel pretty sure that Emery has been in crooked cattle deals with Kit Bandon. These cattlemen who are seein' red might get a hold on Kit through her known association with Emery."

"I don't like it," responded Lincoln gravely. "Kit has been careless about her reputation. Why did she ever tie in with a crook like Emery? He must have had some hold on her. What can we do?"

"I reckon we ought to think about our own hides," returned Thatcher tersely.

"Lordy, we ought to be able to do something to help Kit and still save our hides. That is, if she will accept our help."

"There isn't a cowboy in the valley who would not help Kit Bandon. But I question the wisdom of our mixing any deeper in this mess. You're married to a fine girl and you are ready to settle down homesteading and ranching it. And there's nothing you can do about it anyway. I'd like to get out from under, make up with my girl, and start straight with you in the cattle business."

"You're sure talking sense, Mel," admitted Lincoln. "But—but I *want* to save Kit Bandon from her own mistakes."

"All right. I'm with you," returned Thatcher soberly. "Said I'd stick and I meant it. What do you aim to do?"

"That's where I'm stumped. I don't know. We'll have to wait until we find out what is threatening Kit."

"No! Wait nothing. You'd better want to help her *before* anything threatens."

"But if I don't find out what's threatening her I can't persuade her to leave the valley while there's still time."

"Bradway, I can find out what might happen to Kit Bandon," rejoined Mel, his voice low.

"Mel, if you can find out and will help me I will—"

"O.K., I'm off," said Thatcher quietly. "I wouldn't tell Vince if I were you because he'll trail me, and I'll tell you that hombre is bad medicine." With that Mel gave Lincoln's arm a squeeze and strode off down the street to disappear among the pedestrians.

"Well, I'll be damned," muttered the Nebraskan, just as Vince came shuffling up.

"Hello, boss," he said. "Where's Mel?"

Lincoln felt that no matter what the risk, he would have to be honest with

Vince. "I told Thatcher that I wanted to know exactly what was threatening Kit Bandon. He said he could find out and he went off almost on the run."

"Hell's fire!" ejaculated Vince in an injured tone. "I knew Mel was double-crossin' me. He hasn't told me everythin'."

"Well, there's nothing for us to do, Vince, but wait till he comes back. Did you get any angles on Emery being driven out of town?"

"There's plenty of talk," replied Vince. "An' I suppose you got about the same as me. But don't you savvy, boss, thet these miners an' townspeople hev'n't any idee what's behind all this."

"I think I begin to savvy," replied the Nebraskan.

They walked up and down the street with Bradway doing most of the talking and Vince growing more somber and noncommittal as the time went by. When the hour grew late he tried to get Vince to share his lodgings that night.

"Nope. Thanks, pard, I want to wait up for Thatcher," and bidding his partner good night Vince went his way. Linc went to his room and to bed.

The next morning to his dismay the two cowboys did not meet him for breakfast. He went up to Headley's stables to find that sometime during the night they had saddled their horses and left town. Headly did not know whether or not they had left together. He now was becoming greatly perturbed. He had no idea what direction they had taken or on what errand they were bound. He wished he had not allowed Mel to become implicated in this deal with Kit, and he reluctantly compelled himself to wait.

The hours passed slowly. Occasionally he stalked the streets, looking for

his friends, but they did not come. He had supper alone, afterward walking the streets again from one gambling hall to another, hoping to meet Thatcher or Vince, but in vain. At midnight he returned to his lodgings. He removed only his gun belt, boots and coat. Despite his worry, somehow he soon went to sleep. He seemed only to have closed his eyes when a loud pounding on the door roused him. He leaped off the bed.

"Who is it?" he called, seizing the bar.

"It's Thatcher," came the swift, hoarse whisper. "Let me in. There's hell to pay."

Linc removed the bar and opened the door. "Hello, Mel," he said. "Strike a match and make a light. You'll find a candle on the stand there."

"Couldn't get here sooner," replied Thatcher. The candlelight flared up, revealing his pale, set face.

The Nebraskan sat down upon the bed to pull on his boots. "Where's Vince?" he asked.

"I didn't run into him but I have an idea that he was looking for me."

"What time is it?" asked Linc.

"It's an hour or two before dawn. We've got to do some fast riding, pard—and even then I'm afraid we'll be too late."

"I felt that same way lately somehow," replied Bradway. He got up and buckled on his gun belt. Then he got into his coat.

"It's good you didn't undress," said Thatcher. "We've got to rustle. I had to change horses so I saddled Bay while I was at the stables."

They went out together in the chill gloom. A few lamps were still burning along the main street; the resort that had been Emery's was still blazing

with light. Two horses were standing in the street, tossing their heads and champing their bits. Lincoln tried the cinch on Bay, then he turned to whisper hoarsely to Mel.

"If we've got to ride, we won't be able to talk. Gimme a hunch quick what you found out."

"There's an outfit of cattlemen—not many—sick with how they've been imposed upon and mad as hell at the cowboys, and those ranchers are out to get Emery and Kit."

"What are they going to do?" asked Linc.

"I reckon they are prepared to take the law into their own hands."

"Do the cowboys know?"

"Not many. They've been thrown off the scent. Vince knew all the time. It's a sure bet he will turn up with some of them."

"I can guess the rest," returned the Nebraskan grimly. "Let's ride."

They mounted and headed down the street toward the creek, splashed across, then urged their mounts up the long slope that led to the pass. Thatcher led the way. They crossed the pass in perhaps a quarter of an hour and were heading down the winding road on the valley side.

"Look there!" cried Thatcher excitedly, reining in. "A bonfire!"

"I see it," replied Linc, reining in beside him. "That may mean we're too late. Let's rustle. Once we're off this hill we've got straight clear road for ten or twelve miles."

Down the zigzag slope they saved their horses, and reaching the level they dismounted to tighten their cinches. Mounting again, they were off riding at a ground-eating lope. After covering several miles Thatcher reduced their gait to a trot but he did not give the

horses a long stretch of rest. Soon the horses were going full speed through the night which was at that darkest hour which precedes the dawn. Three times Mel changed gaits and at the end of the last run the big bonfire seemed less than a mile away. He brought his horse sharply to a standstill.

"Reckon this is—far enough," panted Thatcher. "We sure made fast time. Now take a good look, Linc, and see what you can see."

Bradway already was peering through the darkness. "I can see the bonfire. Believe it's located at the edge of the timber—I can make out some dark forms passing in front of the fire."

"Same here," replied Thatcher. "That must be the outfit. Do you think we ought to get a closer look?"

"Let's cut off the road, keep out of sight and hearing, tie our horses in the willows, and sneak up on that outfit."

They turned their heaving horses into the sage. Dawn was close at hand. Already there were gray streaks in the east and the stars had dimmed. When they had reached to within a couple of hundred yards of the fire they dismounted, both with the same thought, and stole forward, eyes and ears keen to detect any movement of horse or man. Reaching the willows, they led their horses some distance before tying them to convenient branches. They stepped into the open again.

They heard horses moving, then low voices. Mel glided ahead noiselessly, a couple of steps ahead of Linc. There were openings in the thicket and lanes spreading between the trees. Into one of these open places Mel vanished. Lincoln crept forward more cautiously until he caught up with Thatcher again. As they paused there in the shadow they heard hoofbeats and low voices.

"Bunch of cowboys," whispered Thatcher excitedly. "Let's follow along. Don't make any noise, Linc."

They confined themselves now to a slow, stealthy advance through the willows. They walked silently, carefully parting the brush and branches to be sure that they did not break any dead snags and constantly peering ahead cautiously, as they drew closer to the blazing fire. Linc tugged Mel's sleeve and whispered to him that they were not more than a mile from the Bandon ranch.

"One more spell like this last one and we'll be getting somewhere," returned Thatcher. "Take it easy now. When the fireworks start we want to make damn sure we don't get caught between their lines of fire."

Linc figured they would soon be passing the spot where the cowboys ought to be, and it behoved them to be exceedingly cautious. When again they approached the edge of the thicket, the sky was light, though it still was dusky in the willow grove. The fire still glowed but not one of the men grouped about it made a move to throw on any more fuel.

"Let's get a little closer," whispered Mel.

They crossed a projecting neck of the timbered bottom to come out almost at the spot where the group of cattlemen waited. They were a little too close for comfort. One of the group was pointing in the direction of the Bandon ranch.

Suddenly Thatcher seized Linc's arm in a grasp so tight that he winced with pain. "Gadamighty!" he gasped. "Look, pard—look!"

A group of horsemen in a half-circle were bringing two bare-headed riders, with hands bound behind them, across

the flat toward the three big trees and the waiting men.

Linc whispered hoarsely, "That's Kit—and Emery."

"Pard, it wouldn't have done any good if we'd gotten here sooner," whispered Mel. "This outfit of cowmen are hell-bent on execution."

Linc knew that Mel was right. It was hard to believe that these desperate men could drive themselves to execute a woman. Emery, yes, but a woman—! His heart sank.

But the practical Thatcher was less moved. "We can get closer presently. Pretty soon these cowmen will be so intent on their dirty job that they won't hear us. I'm just wondering what Vince and those hombres back yonder in the willows will do. If I know him and them they'll ride right up on this bunch."

Lincoln had no heart to reply. There were ten men in the party approaching. That made twenty-three of the vigilantes in all. Blue handkerchiefs masked the lower part of their faces. They were all heavily armed. They moved forward silently and halted under the biggest trees just beyond the pile of embers that had been the fire, where they were met by the cowmen, now mounted, who had been waiting for them.

The two watchers were conscious of sounds off to their left in the willows. Mel pointed over his shoulder. "Those fool cowboys are going to rush the cowmen's party. They're going to get themselves killed for their pains," he muttered.

Now the two groups of cattlemen had come together, and Linc and Mel crawled to a point where they were only fifty paces from this sinister company and easily within hearing. Some of the

vigilantes were already on foot and several of the men dismounted to meet them. A tall man with the shape and movement of the rancher Lee appeared to be the leader.

"Are we all here?" he asked sharply.

"All here, Captain, but there's a few riders prowling around."

"We can't let them hold us up now," returned the leader. "Now Emery, it's time for you to talk." He turned away from the two mounted prisoners and said, "Men, I promised the gambler freedom if he'd tell us what we want to know. We want the proofs."

"Let's rustle, boss, and get it over with," spoke up another gruffer voice.

The two prisoners were in plain sight. The sun had risen and gold and red light bathed the valley in its mellow glow. The sage rippled with the morning breeze. Lincoln saw Emery astride his horse, his hands bound behind him, his dark face haggard and drawn. The other rider was Kit Bandon. She wore a long black coat, evidently hastily thrown over her sleeping gown. Her white bare feet dangled above the stirrups which she could not reach. Lincoln could discern no terror, no cringing in her appearance. Her white face with its scornful eyes was averted from the terrified man beside her.

"Emery, come out with your evidence," rasped the leader.

"I was her partner in plenty of cattle deals," replied the gambler, his voice little louder than a hoarse whisper.

"He's a low-down liar," cried Kit scornfully. "I had no partner in my cattle deals."

"She corrupted—the cowboys! She ruined them," cried Emery desperately, his voice cracking. "She got them to steal for her. She paid them with mon-

ey—and—and in other ways. Her bargain was the same with all. *She sold herself!*"

"Kit Bandon, what have you to say to that?" queried the leader.

"I have given you my answer. You can believe what you wish," was her cold rejoinder, uttered between clenched teeth.

"Men, you've heard. We have the proofs. We're justified. Somebody cut Emery's arms loose and let him go."

Two stalwart men approached Emery and freed him from his bonds. One of them gave the horse a resounding smack on the flank.

"Rustle, you skunk, before we change our minds," called one of the men.

Emery, with convulsed visage and trembling jaw, reined his horse from the group confronting him, and had just gotten beyond the farthest of the three trees when he was met there by the charging cowboys. Then things began to happen.

Linc caught a look of surprise on several of the faces of the cattlemen. Then he heard the whistle of a rope and a dull crack as the noose pulled tight about Emery's neck. His sudden scream of terror was cut short. His body jerked backward off his horse and fell to the earth. At the same instant the cowboy with the lasso flicked the other end over the spreading branch of a willow. As he did so he shouted some command to his companions. Linc recognized the voice of his partner Vince.

Three cowboys were out of their saddles in a twinkling. They grasped the dangling rope and with a violent tug jerked the body of the gambler five feet off the ground. They made the end of the lasso fast to a sapling and then leaped into their saddles again.

The vigilantes, as though paralyzed by the speed of the action that had taken place before their eyes, gaped at the grotesque figure of the gambler. They made no move to interfere with what was going on. Perhaps they thought, as did Linc and Mel, that only justice was being meted out under that willow tree.

The cowboys were strangely silent. They watched Emery jerk spasmodically, shrugging off the black overcoat he had been wearing. The convulsive movements must have lasted several moments. Then the body was still, stretched limp, moving to and fro with the swaying branch.

Bradway turned his eyes away from the dead man to the calm figure of the other prisoner. Her eyes blazed straight ahead in that white mask that was her face.

At that moment the harsh voice of the leader of the cattlemen rang out: "*Kit Bandon, we condemn you to hang for your proven crimes!*"

Linc tore himself free from Thatcher's restraining grasp and was stumbling forward in the direction of the half-circle of vigilantes.

"Wait, men! Wait! You can't do this!" he cried as he ran forward, his empty hands held high.

There was a stir among the men and several exclamations and muttered threats. Now Linc was facing the leader.

"You men don't know what you are doing," he said in a clear, steady voice. "You represent law and order in this country. You can't hang a woman in cold blood. Some of you have wives and daughters. If this woman has plotted with these reckless, simple-minded cowpokes to steal your stock, then she deserves to be punished. But you can't

hang a woman—a neighbor—like a—like a dog," he pleaded earnestly.

Some of the men were beginning to nod their heads. One of them spoke out: "Boss, this hombre is right. I say we turn her over to the law. I don't feel right about stringing up a woman."

Linc took advantage of the interruption. "Men, you'll regret such a deed of violence all the rest of your lives," he urged. "I don't know whether she's guilty or innocent. It's none of my business. I'm not interceding—if you are satisfied that she has stolen your mavericks—"

Another voice growled, "Me, too, chief. Count me out on this deal. If my wife knew I had my hand in hangin' a woman—"

The leader spat into the dust. "You yellow-bellied fools," he rasped. "Don't you men realize that if we take this woman away to prison she'll wriggle herself out of it—and then come back and do the same thing all over again?"

The Nebraskan moved closer to the man he now definitely recognized to be the Texan, Lee. He started to renew his appeal.

"No use, Linc," cried Kit Bandon, her voice deep and full. "God bless you for trying to save me from this man's jealous hatred. It's too late now, Linc. Everything's too late—except for you and Lucy. And now that it's too late I'm going to tell you what I never wanted you to know—that I killed your pal, Jimmy Weston—God have mercy on me, I killed him!"

"That will be enough," snarled Lee. "Get back there, Bradway, or I'll bore you. This woman hangs!" He dismounted, stepped forward, and tossed a noose over Kit Bandon's neck. Then he pulled the rope tight about the slender white throat and threw the end of the lariat

over the branch of the tree just above her head.

As he stepped back a terrible cry rang out, a hoarse bellow of hatred and defiance. A horseman dashed into the circle about the Texan and his prisoner, dismounted and confronted the cowmen's leader. It was Vince.

"She's called the turn on you, cowman!" he shouted. "It's yore hate—wuss than thet, yore jealousy—thet makes you pull this lowdown deal."

"Keep your mouth shut, cowboy," Lee snarled.

"I'm sayin' all I'm goin' to say, Lee." As Vince spoke his gun exploded twice, and Lee stopped, looked surprised, swayed and fell face downward under his horse.

Bradway had time only to cry "Vince" when a volley rang out. The cowpoke whirled and fell. The next moment Linc saw his partner lying on his back in the dust, one arm beneath him, one arm outstretched. A dozen bullets had entered his body.

Linc felt himself pushed aside. He heard a hoarse shout from one of the vigilantes, "Hyar, men! Lay hold hyar an' swing this devl-woman before some more of us stop lead. No one of us is safe as long as she's breathin'."

The Nebraskan turned away. He felt suddenly sick. He saw Thatcher beside him. He heard the trampling sound made by many boots, the sound of many strong bodies in concerted action, the sound of a tree branch violently shaken, the sound of a strangled cry.

Slowly he opened his eyes. Kit Bandon's slender body, clad only in her nightdress, was slowly turning under the swaying branch. Her dark hair had loosened and covered her features. Then a gunshot rang out. Lincoln heard the dull thud of a bullet striking flesh.

A cowboy's merciful bullet had put an end to the suffering of the Maverick Queen.

There followed the sound of many voices, of tinkling spurs, of the creak of saddle leather, of clattering hoofbeats. Two men ran forward with a riderless horse. They lifted the body of Lee and hung it over the saddle. Then mounting their own horses, they rode away across the sunlit sage, leading the dead man's horse by its reins. As the sound of their horses' hoofs died away in the distance, Linc became conscious that the cowboys had come for Vince's body.

The range war was over. Vince was dead. Lee was dead. Kit Bandon was dead. Emery was dead. And Jimmy Weston was dead. They were all dead and nothing was settled.

Mel Thatcher was shaking him gently. "Don't look, pard. It's all over. Leave the rest to us. Rustle for your horse and ride like hell to tell Lucy. But don't tell her how Kit died, Linc. You'll know what to say. Take Lucy away with you. Stay out of South Pass until this all blows over. Leave the rest to me."

Linc heard his partner's words as though they were spoken in a dream. He was conscious of the other cowboys gathering about the body of Vince. He shook himself and broke the strange spell that had bound him since the moment of his tragic failure to save Kit Bandon. There was work to be done. He walked over to the group of cowpokes gathered around his dead friend whose body seemed lonely and forsaken there on the valley floor.

"Boys, Mel here will tell you that Vince was our partner, his and mine," he said. "I wish you would take him to a spot Mel will show you, and bury

him there. And if there's any expense I'll pay it."

Then he walked over to the willow where Kit's pathetic figure swayed in the unnatural radiance of the June morning, looking more like a slim girl than a mature, hardened woman who had died with a sneer of defiance for her executors upon her lovely face.

Taking out his clasp knife, he cut the dead woman down. Covering her body with her cloak, Linc stood there for a moment, remembering all of the vitality and passion that once had been present in that small body.

The cowboys were watching him as he returned. Mel Thatcher spoke up: "We'll take care of that, too, Linc. No cowpoke in this valley will ever say we didn't give Kit Brandon a decent burial. She used some of us a little rough, and Vince isn't the only one who stopped lead because of her, but nobody in this part of Wyoming, long after we boys are gone, will forget the Maverick Queen."

Then silently the Nebraskan shook hands with Thatcher and with the other cowboys, took one last look at Vince and walked slowly with clinking spurs in the direction of the place where long years ago, as it seemed to him now, he had tethered his horse.

Mounting Bay, he rode through the dew-dampened sage to the road. Then he urged the eager horse to a sharp gallop toward the Bandon ranch house. As he crossed the bridge he saw movement under the trees before the house. The lame hired man was limping through the gate looking down the road. As Bay brought him rapidly nearer, Linc caught a glimpse of someone

in the shadow of the porch. At the gate he pulled Bay to his haunches, scattering the gravel as he leaped off.

"Simpson," he said to the hired man, "you've probably guessed it—your mistress is dead. Hitch up the buckboard pronto. I'm taking Miss Lucy away. You stay here until you get further orders. My partner is taking care of the—of Kit Bandon."

Then he turned toward the porch. A white-faced girl with bright golden hair streaming was running to meet him.

"Linc—Linc, please tell me," she cried, "what have they done with Aunt Kit?"

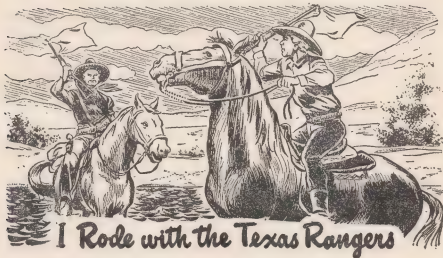
Tenderly the tall Nebraskan took the stricken girl in his arms. Her tear-stained face was tight against his breast. One of his hands was stroking her hair.

"My dear," he was saying, in a voice that was husky with tenderness and love, "it's all over. Kit and Emery—have paid—the penalty. I'm taking you away for a little while. Just pack up some clothes and some few things you will need. Thatcher will take care of Kit's—things, and will close up the house. I don't think either of us will ever want to come back to this ranch again."

Lucy's head made a movement of negation against his breast.

"When we come back," Linc continued, "we will start all over again—up there in our valley." As he finished speaking Lucy raised her head from her husband's shoulder, and as one, they turned to face the dark patch against the distant hills which marked the valley that one day would be their home.

THE END



HELL ON THE BORDER

FROM the time that Sam Bass was shot in my home town, I meant to ride with the Texas Rangers.

Many's the sorry characters I've slapped handcuffs on since that time. Many's the wild places where I've rode. Yet I reckon everything goes back to Sam Bass and that day I saw him die.

July 21, 1878. Seventy-five years ago, three-quarters of a century; and if the good Lord spares me another ten years, I'll be hitting a full hundred. But I remember it all as clear as if it had happened a minute ago. For it set me on a road from which I couldn't turn back.

Sam, lying there on the cot in the vacant house, the sheet so bloody from his wounds that it looked like it had been used to mop up a slaughterhouse. People swarming into Round Rock for a glimpse of the boy who'd left off cot-

tonpicking to go long riding. Some of them sniffing because he was cashing in on his twenty-seventh birthday. My father, a preacher, asking him to confess Christ because, if there'd been mercy for a thief who'd died on a cross, there might be some for a thief found dying in a cow pasture. Ranger Major John B. Jones asking him to confess his company. Sam shaking his head at both of them, taking his chances on the eternity path as he had on the outlaw trail, refusing till the blood bubbles on his mouth stopped him from talking to give information about Frank Jackson who'd got away.

Me, a boy wearing his first long breeches, wasting no tears on the man who'd planned to rob the bank that held everybody's savings. But admiring Major Jones and counting how many

bad men I'd get when I grew up to be a Ranger.

Five years I had to wait. Till March 1, 1883. That day, I rode eighteen miles to Austin, the capital, and was sworn in by Adjutant General W. H. King, head captain of all the Rangers. I was twenty then, full of sand and vinegar, mighty proud that General King had assigned me to the roughest spot ever patrolled by that great force—the Rio Grande, which separated our country of Texas from Old Mexico.

A few days later, I reported to Captain L. P. Sieker, commanding Company D of the Frontier Battalion, at the company's camp near Uvalde. Pretty soon, I learned that a Ranger was a member of a highly disciplined mounted police force, and not a storybook knight who went roistering around wherever horse's hoofs took him.

Company D's assignment was to scout that whole long stretch of the border: from the Pecos River settlements to Rio Grande City and back again, a round trip of eight hundred miles. It was a hard, tricky task with confusing spiderwebs of trails slowing up our chase after desperados. Investigation work was another uphill job since most of the people, even on the Texas side, spoke only Spanish. Many border sheriffs were in cahoots with outlaws across the river and kept Mexican deputies to thwart us by giving protection to the bandit gangs plundering ranches on both sides of the river.

I bucked several of these sheriffs who should have been wearing stripes instead of stars. But the worst one I ever ran up against was Dario Gonzales, who was all set to measure me for stripes. Old Dario, kingpin of the border's worst town, Laredo, running all of Webb County with the help of

forty crooked political henchmen we Rangers nicknamed the Forty Thieves.

I'd been a Ranger for about a year when we got an SOS call from some Webb County citizens about a gang that kept crossing the river and snatching every bronc in sight. No use appealing to Dario because he got a rake-off on every pony sold on the black market in Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican side. Dario had passed word that Webb County was off-limits for Company D. But no boss thief-sporting a badge was running his bluff on the Texas Rangers. So Captain Sieker sent a detail of seven men, headed by Corporal D. D. Lindsey, to round up the bunch causing so much trouble.

Early one morning, we struck their trail near the mouth of San Ambrosio Creek, eighty miles above Laredo. Hoof tracks indicated they were making for a certain crossing on the Rio Grande. As we set out in pursuit, Corporal Lindsey and four of our squad were riding ahead. Ben Riley and I were some distance behind looking after the pack mules: a job that generally went to buok privates like us.

Suddenly the corporal sighted two men, each riding a horse and each leading one, headed toward the river. The pair had already crossed the creek. When they spotted our outfit, they dropped their led horses and spurred their mounts in the direction of a high peak overlooking Old Mexico.

"At 'em, boys!" Corporal Lindsey shouted. "Head 'em off before they hit the river bank!"

We lashed our ponies and gave chase. The five Rangers in front plunged into the stream. Three horses bogged down in the deep mud of the channel, then fell, pitching their riders into the

water. Ranger C. W. Griffin's mount tumbled down on its master, smashing his collar bone and nearly wrenching his shoulder out of its socket. Frank Sieker, the captain's younger brother, managed to make it across. In a few minutes, he joined Ben and me who'd missed the creek by taking a cut off and were now hot on the trail of the horse thieves.

Riley's fast bronc sprinted ahead of ours. Halfway up the hill, he overtook the bandits and rode straight toward them. I was close behind him when he pulled up. Frank Sieker was loping along a few yards in my rear.

"We're Texas Rangers!" Riley bawled. "You're under arrest for—"

He got no further. Without a word of warning, the two raised their rifles and shot him off his saddle. As he fell—his thigh was shattered—he drew his gun and fired at them.

The bandits turned to rain bullets on Sieker and me. Gunsmoke singed our eyebrows and blistered our cheeks. I let go with my Winchester and Frank with his six-shooter. My shot buried itself in the shoulder of one bandit. His gun slid from his hand to the ground. Lying prone across his horse, clutching its mane to keep from falling, he goaded the pony on with Spanish curses and kept moving.

As he sped down the hill, my gun was roaring in a send-off meant to blast him from his mustang. I was aiming again to drop him before he got out of shooting range when I heard a gasp of pain from Frank Sieker.

"Oh, my God!"

It sounded like a death cry. I wheeled my horse as bullets from the second bandit's rifle whizzed past me. Frank was reeling backward off his pony, his pistol clenched tightly by its barrel.

The six-shooter was still gripped in his hand when he tumbled by the side of a prickly-pear clump, shot through the heart.

Seeing that game boy murdered by thieving hellions made me boiling mad, and, in that flashing second, I resolved to make my gun talk better. As the remaining outlaw drew a bead to send me after Frank, my bullet clipped him in the right hand and then deflected to shatter the stock of his Winchester. The gun slid from his fingers. He sprawled out on his horse, like his companion before him, and disappeared at breakneck speed down the hill.

All during the fight, the horses had been carrying us farther up the peak, jumping over brush, rock, and cactus to dodge bullets. When I got to the summit, I could see Sieker's horse below and Riley's still farther down where the shooting had commenced. At the foot of the hill was a cluster of adobe huts with a lot of excited men running around. Evidently the fugitives had just reached this settlement of Texas Mexicans.

It looked like I'd have to go down and claim them as prisoners. That wouldn't be any easy job, either. For crooks like these two passed out enough scraps from their pickings to keep a lot of friends and allies on both sides of the river.

I reloaded my Winchester and tightened my ammunition belt. Then my ears caught the distant drum of hoofbeats. Turning my horse, I saw three men riding full speed up the side of the hill. They drew nearer. I recognized them as my comrades who'd bogged down in the creek and decided to wait till they came up.

They stopped for a minute to give Ben Riley first aid and to cover Frank

Sieker's face with a bandanna. A few minutes later they reached the summit and we all charged down the hill toward the village.

We halted on the outskirts, guns drawn, but couldn't fight it out with the men massing on the plaza because there were too many women and children milling around. A big fellow came up and introduced himself as Dario's deputy for that town. He wouldn't surrender the pair to state officers, proposing instead that he arrest them himself under the authority of Webb County. In return, he agreed to send out a wagon to pick up our three casualties and carry them to Eagle Pass.

It was a bad bargain, but the best we could drive without slaughtering a lot of people whose main offense was keeping bad company. The deputy loaded the two killers in a buggy, with us riding behind as guards. But no sooner had we landed in Laredo, two days later, than Old Dario showed his hand.

His face was twisted with hate of Rangers when the deputy delivered the prisoners, along with our written complaint of murder. We'd barely stepped out of the courthouse before a big bunch of his badge toters ganged us with guns and papers. Assault with intent to murder those two badmen we'd run down, was the charge! We submitted to arrest rather than have the border political rings brand us as lawmen who held themselves above the law. A few minutes later, our whole detail was looking out from behind the bars of Laredo jail.

What a fix for members of the state's own police force to be in! But when Texas Rangers couldn't shoot their way out of a tight spot, they always thought their way out.

So we demanded that Old Dario walk

us around town to see if we could find somebody to go our bond. As we trudged along, we looked for some store with an English sign because it might lead to somebody who'd give us a hand.

Block after block shops were labeled *bodega* or *cantina*, but never one that read *Grocery Store* or *Saloon*. More of the same, with our feet tired and our spirits low, till we finally spotted a sign reading *Grant Feed Store*. Our hearts leaped when we saw it. It was like finding a spring in a desert.

We entered the store, identified ourselves as Texas Rangers, and Mr. Grant, the proprietor, readily agreed to post bail. Dario turned us loose and Governor Ireland later sent the Attorney General down from Austin to have these frame-up charges dismissed.

Before we left, Ranger O. D. Baker fired a parting salute at Dario. He missed, but his braving the old rogue started things moving toward an eventual cleanup of that rotten town. For the law-abiding faction rallied later under the town marshal and a good percentage of the Forty Thieves were killed in a pitched battle on the streets.

Following that Laredo trouble, I went with my whole company to Brady City, center of a brand-burning epidemic plaguing the Texas hill country. Our first day there, we prevented a battle between two factions making the summer roundup. They were drawn up facing each other with cocked six-shooters when Captain Sieker rode in between them, saying:

"Gentlemen, if there's any shooting to be done, the Rangers will do it."

For four weeks, we followed the roundup, keeping different ranchers from killing each other over brand disputes.

When it was finished, we'd confiscated six hundred cattle bearing burned or unregistered "maverick" brands. These we turned over to the sheriff who sold them and put the money in the county treasury. As a result, many a rustler lost a season's work and whined mightily.

After winding up that little business, we scouted for stagecoach robbers along the San Saba River. The wheel halters laid low when we got on their trail. But, meanwhile, worse troubles were hatching up and down the border where we were needed more.

By that time, I'd won corporal's rank. Because I'd handled myself well in the San Ambrosio fight, I was chosen to bring law to a border area that had never respected law before.

A call came for Rangers to guard the tax collector of Val Verde County while he made his rounds among some wild people living on a wild river. Devil's River, that stream was rightfully called, because it must have flowed right out of hell's mouth. Most of the ranchers hugging its banks were squatters on state land, running sheep and cattle but dead set against paying taxes, of any kind. Only once a year would any county official venture into that section and then only to try and collect tax money.

With another Company D man assisting me, I rode across deep, ugly draws and jungles of grass higher than my head, to back up the tax collector. Just the year before, those squatters had picked up guns and sent him high-tailing out of their territory. But this year he was squired by two Rangers who didn't have any more sense than to shoot it out if matters came to that. And that made quite a difference in his collections.

Several times, I thought we were in for a shooting showdown with some ranchman and his hardbitten cowboys. But when we Rangers would start inching up with cocked Winchesters, the rancher would grudgingly begin counting out handfuls of ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces.

One man did seat himself in a chair with a gun across his knees, challenging the whole bunch of us to collect one red cent from him. It was either kill him or take his cattle for taxes, and that would mean a fight too.

I gave his woman a look, and she sailed into him. Well, sir, a nagging tongue proved the persuader that a pair of cocked Colts couldn't be. That big ruffian, who'd been ready to take on the whole Texas Rangers and Governor Ireland thrown in, backed down before a mite of a gal. He was trembling like a whipped puppy when she told him it was better to lose his gold than his life. Then he paid up.

Things simmered down in Val Verde County after the Ranger visit, and the officials had no more trouble. But after that month of tax gathering had ended, I decided I'd as soon dig gold out of the mountains as try to collect it from those rambunctious squatters.

In the spring of 1885, our company was once more stationed at Uvalde. One sundown, a man rode in wild-eyed and on a spent horse from Carrizo Springs, halfway between Laredo and Eagle Pass. He told a frantic story of bandits crossing over from the Mexican side of the Río Grande, running off a bunch of cattle and killing the *vaqueros* herding them.

We jumped into our saddles and made a non-stop gallop of sixty-five miles. But when we reached Carrizo Springs, there were no reports of

invaders from across the border. However, we did learn that a large body of Mexican horsemen were converged at a certain crossing with their guns pointed toward Texas.

We lit out for the crossing. There from the Texas bank of the river, we sighted a number of riders milling around on the Mexican side. They assembled in battle formation, rifle barrels gleaming in the early-morning sun, when they saw us.

"Close your ranks, boys," our commander ordered. "Keep your triggers cocked while I see what these hombres are up to." Then he shouted across, "Good morning, senores. Why do your guns threaten our soil?"

Their head man edged his horse forward. "We have no intention of harming *Americanos* in Texas, *senor*," he yelled back. "But there are *Meficanos* there with whom we have political differences."

Then we understood what the trouble was all about—one of Old Mexico's boiling political feuds that were always spilling over, in blood and lead, to the Mexican communities of Texas.

Our commander moved closer to the water's edge so he could be heard. "We're all Democrats in Texas," he called. "Fight out your own politics in your own country. But don't cross over here to settle your squabbles."

The Mexican leader took off his sombrero and made a sweeping bow to the captain. "Nevertheless, we insist on crossing, *senor*. This is an affair of honor that—"

Our commander was getting impatient with all the palaver. "Nevertheless, you insist on getting your damned heads blown off!" he interrupted. "Now scatter and go home or we'll be doing the crossing."

The Mexican said something to his men. They raised their guns high. We hoisted ours to the same level. Rangers faced that mob of foreign politicians.

Their chief bowed again. "Before we fight, *senores*," he shouted, "may we have the privilege of knowing whom we are fighting?"

"You'll know damn well when we wade into that river," the captain shouted. "But I don't mind telling you now. We're the Texas Rangers."

"*Rangers Tejanos!—Texas Rangers!*" We heard the words echoing through the ranks of the politicians. Guns were being lowered. Some of the bunch were turning their horses and quietly easing away.

The head politico said something to his men. Then he cupped his hand and yelled, "*Solados americanos* American soldiers—we would fight. Texas Rangers we will not fight. Therefore we propose a peace treaty."

"Agreed," the captain bawled back. It was as good a way as any of ending the farce.

A man from each side rode into the middle of the stream, his carbine held high over his head, a white handkerchief fluttering from the muzzle as a flag of truce. These two served as couriers to carry notes back and forth from one leader to another. The boss politico wanted all sorts of flowery stipulations in the script. Our captain bluntly insisted that the treaty just cover one point:

Texas forces wouldn't cross the river for battle if Mexican politicians stayed off our territory with their grudges and their guns.

After several exchanges of notes, the Mexicans finally gave in. Still protected by the truce banners of the messengers, five men from each group then rode

into the river and put signatures to the treaty.

While all the palaver had been going on, some of us Rangers had slipped into a marsh at the river's edge. From that concealment, we aimed our rifles. While water oozed down our boot tops and swarms of horseflies stung at our skins, we'd kept our men covered against any sudden treachery from those aggressors.

But the session ended cordially with the Mexicans giving us military salutes and riding away. Our representatives returned with copies of the only peace document ever signed saddleback in midstream between Americans and Mexicans. For a long time thereafter, all was quiet in that Texas county of Dimmit and the Mexican area across the river.

Following that bloodless little tilt, I went on detached duty as a Ranger detective. For months, I wandered over the hills and thickets of the border, posing as a footloose cowboy, but flashing my gun whenever I located some slippery law dodger. Many were the men I scouted over miles that wore out the hoofs of more horses than I can recall. Yet of all them, two stand out in my memory, because they turned out different from what I'd expected.

The first was a nester for whom I carried a Tennessee extradition warrant. He surrendered peacefully when I found him at his secluded place in Nueces Canyon on Devil's River. But his wife and young-uns clutched at my chaps, crying and begging that I shouldn't take him away. After I'd sent him over the road, I got to thinking that was the meanest thing I'd ever done. Since he'd lived a clean life during many years in Texas, I started moving heaven, earth, and Tennessee. Six

months later, that man was home with his family.

The second was an old hermit with whom I camped one night on that same river. When he lay down on his blankets, still wearing his six-shooter and placing a long-barreled rifle by his side, I suspected him of being a fellow who'd robbed a great many ranch houses in those mountains. So I took my pistol to bed with me, keeping it across my breast with my hand on it. Then, making myself doubly sure of being protected, I tucked the Winchester in along side of my right leg.

After a little while, I heard someone talking. I raised myself cautiously on my elbow, thinking that one of his partners had come up and the two of them were plotting to do me in. You could have knocked me dead with a jack rabbit's tail! Through the dwindling light of the campfire, I glimpsed the old man kneeling in prayer. I listened intently, and a more fervent prayer I never heard.

He thanked God for cattle and crops and all the good things in Texas. Then he prayed for the stranger in camp: that the wanderer might be a good man and be protected while journeying across this wild country. He reminded the Lord that he, himself, was sleeping with his guns only because he didn't know who his heavily armed guest was. But if the visitor were an outlaw, wouldn't the Maker show him the error of his ways before the Rangers ran him down?

I smiled, kicked my gun out of my blanket spread, laid my six-shooter at my side, and went to sleep. I never slept better than I did after that prayer on Devil's River.

Five years had gone by since I'd joined the Texas Rangers. I'd had my

share of citations for good service and was now the sergeant of Company D, ranking next to Captain Frank Jones, who'd succeeded Captain Slicker as commander. For a while, I circulated over Texas, helping to uncover different gangs of law violators on special assignment from a famous old Ranger captain, Sul Ross, later our governor.

Then in 1888, while the United States was trying to decide about re-electing Grover Cleveland as its president, I was sent on an emergency detail to a border town where a bitter feud was raging over whether Porfirio Diaz should stay on as president of Mexico.

Roma was the name of the place. Right on the Rio Grande, too, so that you could holler across to Mexico. A Texas judge had recently been shot off the bench there for trying to bring peace according to the legal forms of a state whose rulers were regarded as alien conquerors by these Spanish-speaking Aztecs along the big river. Both pro-Diaz and anti-Diaz factions were running candidates in a bitter political contest that showed every promise of ending in a showdown slaughter on election day.

When we got there, three days before the balloting, the community was already divided into two armed camps. Each party had entrenched itself behind high adobe walls with the only entrances being heavy double-iron doors supposed to be bullet-proof. Drums were banging, harmonicas were blaring, and trigger fingers were itching inside each armed citadel.

I looked toward the river to see hordes of peons swimming or wading across. Some to back up Don Porfirio in Mexico's lost colony of Texas. Others to get a whack at him in a Texas ballot box when they didn't dare whisper a

word against him on a Mexican hacienda.

As soon as one of the state's visiting voters set foot on its soil, he went to the fort of his party, where he gorged on tortillas, beans, coffee, and mescal. Outside of those barricades, a Mexican couldn't get a bite or a sip.

The commotion mounted as more and more *Diaz*es and *anti-Diaz*es poured across the river. Each new batch of recruits reporting to either fortress was greeted with a fanfare of hands and a salvo of drums. You'd have thought it was recruiting day for World War II. Then empty jugs that had held mescal began piling up in mocking little pyramids before the adobe barriers.

A legion of partisans had forded the Rio Grande the day before election. We turned none back because our assignment, in that town, was not to see how many voted but how few got shot. By noon, rows of gun barrels were poking menacingly across the walls of each stronghold. Mescal jugs were being thrown tauntingly into the main street to the accompaniment of jeering songs that the drums were whipping up into peans of battle.

We Rangers started riding up and down the street—saying nothing but just riding. Six of us keeping a thousand men from blasting out each other's guts. Our lives dependent upon any mescal-soaked peon who might take a notion to aim a potshot at some patch of hair sticking out above a Winchester muzzle on the opposite wall. That would have set off a crossfire wiping us out like clay pigeons. But from home base to outfield we kept riding—from the hitching-post that marked the nearest limits of the street to the one that indicated its farthest.

Bells rang for dinner in each of the

war camps. Guns disappeared over the grim turrets. We patrolmen relaxed with sighs.

"Gawdamighty, boys," Captain Jones muttered hoarsely. "If that was a warm-up, this town'll need a regiment of undertakers, not a squad of Rangers, tomorrow."

He turned to me. "Just one way of heading off the worst massacre since the Alamo when those damned polls open. That's to keep the two sides from tangling on the street. Right, Sergeant Aten?"

"Right, Captain," I answered. "That—and cutting down on the mescal."

The captain considered my suggestion. "Good idea, lad. Aten, escort the Diaz leader here. Hughes, bring in the anti-Diaz one."

A few minutes later, both feuding chieftains were facing the commander. They bowed suavely to each other in the fashion of foemen. Then each shook hands, too cordially, with the captain.

"I understand," our commander began dryly, "that Roma with five hundred people casts one thousand ballots and fires two thousand bullets in every election. I'm not here to check voters' qualifications. But the Governor of Texas asked me to tell you that the picnic is going to be peaceful, this year."

The rival bosses flashed each other a look—a let's-stick-together, to-hell-with-this-gringo look.

"You do not understand, *mi Capitano Jones*," the Diaz man replied. "With due respect to *el senor Gobernador*, this is an affair between Mexicans." His words were pleasant, but edged with all the hatred of all the Aztecs for all the conquerors from Spaniards to Saxons.

The captain's eyes blazed. "With all due respect to you, *senor!*" he stormed,

"the ground that you stand on is Texas. Whatever candidates win the election will have to swear oaths to administer their offices according to Texas law. And that's what I'm here to enforce. Texas law, *senores*. Every damned word and syllable of it!"

The anti-Diaz leader winked at his opponent. What those fellows couldn't conveniently speak with their tongues they were telling each other with their eyes. Eyes that were voting unanimously even if hands wouldn't. Voting that a new breed of *conquistador* wasn't telling the border how to run its business.

"You disturb yourself unnecessarily, Capitano," the anti-Diaz man said smoothly. "We—"

"Shut up!" the captain roared. "I'm running things here." He calmed down a little. "I'm authorized to tell you fellows that the election will not be held except under certain conditions."

"The conditions, *senor?*" murmured the Diaz leader.

Captain Jones's gaze fixed on them. "One bunch votes in the morning and the other in the afternoon, with each side staying behind its walls while the other is marking its ballots. One drink of mescal—just one and no more—under the belt of a voter, and no gun at his belt. The losing side to accept the decision of the majority. After the polls close, everybody scatters."

The two politicians glanced at each other. Plainly these rules upset preparations for the rowdiest and goriest election ever seen on the border.

"These are hard conditions, *amigo*," one said. "What if we refuse to accept them?"

The captain's hand strayed casually across his pistol butt. "Then, *senores*, if one peon so much as gets a bullet

scratch, I'll hound the both of you to hell or Mexico City—even if I have to trade draws with Don Lucifer or Don Porfirio to do it."

Again eyes consulted with eyes. Again the vote was unanimous—but unanimous, this time, in defeat.

The pair bowed gravely to the commander. "We accept, Senor Capitano."

Next morning, the sun lazed up bright and hot over the Rio Grande. The Diaz faction marched out, headed toward the voting place. At their head rode the leader on a handsome black stallion. Flanking him, two color bearers waving the Mexican and American flags, with maybe the Eagle and Serpent flaunted just an inch higher than the Stars and Stripes. Right behind, the armed guards sitting gleaming silver-mounted saddles decked on beautiful, prancing horses. Bringing up the rear, the poor, cheering rabble, keeping step on feet either unshod or wrapped in Indian straw sandals, to drum beat and hoof beat.

Afternoon and the same kind of glory march, with all the trappings, staged by the anti-Diaz party. Evening, and the Rio Grande once more a teeming

passageway of men returning home on full stomachs that would yet know many empty days in Mexico before next election day in Texas. Not a shot had been fired, not a dare passed.

After it was all over, I was too tired to listen to the congratulations that Captain Jones was handing his men. I just flopped and rolled a smoke, thinking of how a whole town had barely missed being turned into a slaughterhouse.

A tough three days we'd been through, with politics making the Rio Grande sizzle hotter than hell's lake. Which side won I can't remember, and it doesn't matter any more. But come to think of it, I'd seen this section move forward in spite of all the ruckus.

I'd seen the border hold its first peaceful election. That was something to think about. Something to build on.

Something that the brown folk on both banks of the river would build on, once they'd learned to use the ballot right. Something that new leaders of their kind were trying to teach them.

God help Don Porfirio on the south bank and Old Dario on the north bank when those Aztecs learned!

JEDEDIAH STRONG SMITH

By Clarence E. Flynn

HIS traps were seldom empty;
Each year at rendezvous
He gave a good accounting,
Then started out anew;
He found new trails and passes,
Crossed wastelands wild and dread;
And trusty was the rifle
Of Bible-totin' Jed.

His feet were always restless,
Exploring lakes and streams;
His days were full of action,
His mind was full of dreams;
Far from his home and people
They dug his final bed;
But Western hearts were grateful
For Bible-totin' Jed.

THE SCISSOR-TAILS

By WILL C. BROWN



They weren't the finest mounts in Texas, but they might do to pull a man's herd through the winter.

WE were camped on Jim Ned Creek, me and Nevvie, and saw this light burning off across the naked mesquites. We and the four scissor-tails were nightin' it there because it was water and had a low bluff that helped knock off the norther. Cold by then, up the shank of November, I expect. Must of been, because cold weather was why Mr. Hopson let us go. He couldn't feed us through the winter, naturally. It was the time of year that made you wish you had a home somewhere, so you could dig in till spring.

The light showed up, far across to the west, a little after dark.

"Must be somebody's house," I said. Then just for a joke, to try to make Nevvie laugh, since he had been so quiet all day, I said, "Maybe some rich rancher. Maybe we'd angle over that

way in the morning, he might want to buy these fine horses. Naturally he would have to pay pretty steep, to get good horseflesh like this."

Nevvie raised his pinched-in face to cottontail stew we'd cooked in a lard bucket. We were starved and there's not much meat on one cottontail rabbit, especially one that's been hit with a .45 slug.

Nevvie raised his pinched-in face to look at the light and then over to where those scissor-tails were staked, and back to the stew, just giving me a thin grin across the campfire.

Nevvie said, "Yeah, maybe it's a rich rancher. And again maybe not."

We had ridden herd three-four months for a hard-lucker named Mr. Hopson, which is where I met Nevvie. When that played out, the kid asked if

he could ride along north with me. Mr. Hopson said he was mighty sorry he couldn't pay us and took us out to the pen and told us to take our pick of two scissor-tails apiece and if he ever laid hands on any money he wasn't one to forget his just debts.

I figured to ride for Cross Plains, to my uncle's. He might help me find a job for the winter. Nevvie said he had nowhere better to go, and would like to drift along with me for a while. It would be bad enough for me to show up at Uncle Pomp's, another mouth to feed, much less bringing somebody with me. Both of us probably would get kicked out, but I told Nevvie to come along. I was already past seventeen and thinking to join the Confederate cavalry next year if the war held on. Nevvie was a good range hand but no more than fourteen. Sort of a dried-up little prairie-dog-looking kid and he thought I was about it.

Hopson would have paid us, if he'd had a cent. But by then you couldn't give cattle away. Sure enough, you really couldn't. There wasn't thirty dollars Federal cash in that half of Texas.

Or nothing else much. No coffee, no flour, no beans, no cloth for clothes, no jobs, not even many people. Nothing but longhorn cattle, and no buyers anywhere. The Yankees had fixed us proper.

At daylight I was frozen stiff. I'd have traded both those sorry horses for a coat. But nobody with gumption would have given a warm coat for hammer-headed runts like those scissor-tails. A scissor-tail is a half-broke scrub horse, the sorriest thing there is with four legs, just barely a cut above a coyote. Well, that's what we had to show for three-four months hard riding on Hopson's range.

I said, "You want to angle by that place over there?"

Nevvie said, "Yeah, if you want to."

The light had come from no rich rancher's house. Soon after daylight we rode up on a shack with the circle of dead mesquite brush left careless around it, where they had cut it for the clearing.

I said, "Nevvie, look how they leave their brush. Too lazy to stack it in one place and burn it. Place looks like a big nest with a house in the middle. That's what they call these kind of people nesters."

There was a wagon in the yard, with a wheel off. I saw a wash pot, a woodpile, a pole corral with a milk cow and a sway-back mare in it, and a few cattle grazing around. There was a barn to the side of the corral.

And it was no rich rancher that came out. It was a woman. She watched us from the door as we rode up, a lean woman with black hair blowing and the norther whipping her long dress.

I touched my hat and waited, thinking she would invite us to get down.

She looked hard at me, then at Nevvie. He sat drawn up in his too-big saddle, pink and freezing in that thin shirt, like I was, both of us holding the lead ropes to the scissor-tails which were fidgeting around, trying to turn their rumps against the norther.

The woman said something over her shoulder, into the doorway. A man came out.

He was tall like her and hard used, his face tight and unfriendly. He had on a shirt and patched pants, with a gun and belt tight and high up like nesters worn them. I felt like it had been a mistake to ride by there. Nevvie must not have liked it either. He just looked at his saddle horn.

You got to feel sorry for a nester, though. Wherever one came from, it was probably better back there than what he'd got into now. Being a nester was sure-enough a case of a man taking on a big tough country, bare-knucks. A nester was usually suspicious and mean, naturally. It was him against everybody.

This fellow's face showed all that, as he eyed me and Nevvie and our scissor-tails.

"What'd you boys want?" he said. His voice was gruff. When he spoke he looked only at me, naturally seeing I was in charge and that Nevvie was just a kid.

I told him we were just riding by, that we were headed for Cross Plains. Anybody else would have asked us to come in the house and warm and have a cup of parched corn coffee.

He kept looking at our horses. It hit me that where nearly everybody in Texas would have laughed at seeing our scissor-tails, this man wasn't concealing that he had a sudden interest in them. So I got it. He was hard up for riding stock there, and anybody with cattle and without mounts to work them, even scissor-tails, is about out of business.

The woman came back to the door and said something. The man turned and looked hard at her, but nodded, and faced back to me.

He said, "You want to come in and warm?"

I was about to say no, that we would be riding on. Then somebody else showed at the door.

It was a girl. One second she wasn't there and the next second she was, like a song that comes into your head from out of nowhere. At first, looking past the mother, I couldn't see much, then

she came all the way out. She was about my age, slender and graceful as an antelope, dark eyes in a white face, her dark hair and calico blowing, and somehow the icy edge went off the norther. She looked at us, not realizing, I guess, how the breeze shaped her calico to her, and I touched my hat again. She stood beside the woman, looking as if she did not know whether to smile or keep that serious expression on her thin face.

It was an effort for me to drag my eyes back to the nester. But when I found my tongue I said, "Well, if it wouldn't put you out, I'd be obliged to warm a minute—how about you, Nevvie?"

Nevvie looked at the two on the porch without raising his head, like a prairie dog squinting up from its hole, and went back to studying the top of his saddle horn. I wished the girl wasn't seeing me with such a thin, hunkered up little kid as Nevvie, and that he would wipe his nose and that we were not leading those shaggy horses. But being a nester girl, maybe she would not know the difference. Maybe they all thought a horse was just a horse.

I swung off. Nevvie seemed undecided, but then he got off too. The man came over and helped us to tie up to a post oak sapling in the yard.

The man said to me, "No use freezing. You and your partner come on in and warm."

He stalked ahead of us and we went in, me crowding Nevvie ahead and nudging him to take off his hat.

Inside was dim lighted but clean as a pin. Not a speck anywhere, bare floors scrubbed so clean I hated to walk on them, the iron stove shining, the beds made neat, and through a doorway the

kitchen room looking just as bare but just as clean.

The woman and the girl stood together, to one side, not exactly looking at either of us. All I could see was the girl, but properly kept from staring at her, while I backed up to warm. Nevvie backed up close to me, and the man stood just inside the door, and nobody said a word.

About time some conversation was made, I thought. I said, "My name's Joe Davis. Been riding for the Hopson ranch down in Coleman County. This is Nevvie. We worked down there together, till our jobs played out."

Not a grunt. The nester stood in his tracks, his face lines hard set. The woman seemed to look mostly at the man, waiting for him to speak.

Then darned if Nevvie didn't talk. He was looking at his feet but his tongue worked suddenly. "Those are our horses," he said. "That's the way the man paid us."

I thought, Good Lord, Nevvie, why did you have to mention those sorry scissor-tails? I looked quick at the girl, hoping she would see that at least I wasn't bragging about owning those animals. Her eyes were bright and something close to a smile softened her white, pinched face. She and the woman both looked at the man.

He said, "Davis, you're old enough to have some sense. How come you haven't joined the Confederate Army?"

That was a funny question, I thought. I said, "Well, I figure to join up next year if the South hasn't already won by then. I'll be eighteen in May."

The nester looked stern at me, then at his wife and daughter.

"Glad you're smart enough to wait," he said. His face was long and grim, his eyes burning.

He said, "A boy no more than fourteen that feels like he's got to go to war just because everybody else is, needs somebody like you to teach him a little sense."

I said yeah, I guessed so, thinking to myself that nesters were a queer bunch.

He said, "I'll tell you how it is, Davis. Son of mine was bound to try to join the Texas cavalry. When I put my foot down, he allowed he was going anyway. I said, you run off from home and join the army, you never set foot in our door again and me or nobody in this family ever speaks to you again. That's what I told him. He ran off anyhow. Left us three-four months ago. Left me to run this place myself, with no help—"

The woman said, "Pa! Don't—!" There was a pleading sound in her voice. The girl touched her mother. The man glared hard at me.

I looked at Nevvie and Nevvie looked at his feet. I looked at Nevvie's thin white face, and the dark eyes like the woman's, and for the first time I saw "nester" written all over that hungry little kid. My mouth felt like a bridle-bit was in it and I couldn't say anything for a minute.

Then I asked him, "You folks Yankee, by any chance?"

The man shook his head. "Not Yankee, not Rebel. We come here from Missouri to homestead and I got all I can do to try to pull this spread through the winter. My horse broke his leg and I got no money to hire hands. If I had a boy that was willing to help instead of having big ideas about a uniform, and if I had horses, we'd make it. By spring I'd have a pretty good herd to try to drive north to market."

I sure had butted into something. I knew that much. I inched a little way

off from Nevvie and he inched right after me.

Nevvie said to his feet, "They wouldn't take me, Pa. But I did get a job. I earned them two horses."

In my bones I could feel the way things stood there. This man was hard and he was law in that house, and if he said they would never speak to Nevvie again, then nobody had better speak. It was time for me to get out of there, naturally. So I started figuring how to do that with the least commotion, when the girl smiled.

She smiled at me, those deep dark eyes soft and misty, then she smiled straight at Nevvie. He must have felt her smile, for he looked up then, and across to her, and pulled his mouth tight as if to keep back either a laugh or a tear.

She came across the bare floor, light as a shadow, a white arm reaching out. She came to Nevvie and touched his shoulder and said, "How have you been, General?"

Her voice was like stars in a dark mossy night, a kind and understanding voice with just a fringe of older sister in it. I planted my fists on my hips and raised my chin at the nester. Nevvie was pink as sunup and for the first time I saw him look happy.

Then the woman was at the stove, too, and she put a lined brown hand to Nevvie's cheek and kissed him on the head.

The girl said to Nevvie, "Those horses, Nevvie! All yours! They're beautiful!"

Nevvie slipped a cautious glance over to the man who was leaning against the wall now, fingering his whiskers. The man nodded. He said, "Yeah, they are pretty good-looking mounts, son."

Nevvie held his head up. It dawned

on me that all the time, Nevvie had been proud of those scissor-tails. He hadn't managed to get a uniform on and go parading off with a bunch of reckless cavalymen to win the war overnight. But he had come home with horses. I tried to think back, to study those scissor-tails again in my mind, trying to remember if there was anything good about them I might have overlooked.

I went to the door and opened it. I was just going to look out there where we had tied the scissor-tails. I hadn't meant to go out, anyway, but right behind me was this girl and she touched my arm.

"Don't leave," she said, in that husky little voice. "We'll fix you something to eat."

I closed the door. I had already seen what I wanted to see. They weren't the finest mounts in Texas, naturally. But with me and Nevvie riding them, they would do to pull a man's herd through the winter till he could drive to market.

I said, "Well, now, thank you. I just wanted to see if our horses were all right."

Nevvie put his hat on and walked up to his pa. He said, "Pa, have you got any matches?"

The man's face was not as hard as it was when I first saw him. He reached into the patched pants and brought out matches.

"What you want with them, son?"

Nevvie motioned to me. He said, "Let's go stack up that nester brush and burn it, Joe. Then I'll show you around the place."

I said, "All right, Nevvie. But first let's get those horses in the pen and feed them."

A man ought to take good care of a good cow pony.



LONG NIGHT

By ELMORE LEONARD

Dave Boland needed money—but he needed even more to learn that you don't get something for nothing.

NEAR the crest of the hill, where the road climbed into the timber, he raised from the saddle wearily and turned to look back toward the small, flickering pin points of light.

The lights were people, and his mind gathered faces. A few he had seen less than a half hour before; but now, to Dave Boland, all of the faces were expressionless and as cold as the lights. They seemed wide-eyed and innocently, stupidly vacant.

He rode on through the timber with what was left of a hot anger, and now

it was just a weariness. He had argued all afternoon and into the evening. Argued, reasoned, threatened and finally, pleaded. But it had ended with "I'm sorry, I've got my supper waiting for me," and a door slammed as soon as his back was turned.

He felt alone and inadequate, and for a moment a panic swept him, leaving his forehead cold with perspiration. The worst was still ahead, telling Virginia.

Wheelock had been in the hotel dining-room and he had approached the big rancher hesitantly and told him he was sorry to bother him . . .

"Mr. Wheelock, I paid you prompt for that breeding. The calf was too big, that's why it died. I did everything I could. If you'll breed her again—"

"I heard the calf strangled. Son, when you help a delivery, loop your rope around the head then bring it good and tight along the jaws, and a few turns on the fore-legs if they're

out." He drew circles in the air with his fork. "Then you don't strangle them to death." And he laughed with a mouthful of food when he said, finally, "The breeding fee generally doesn't include advice on how to deliver."

E. V. Timmons leaned back from the roll-top and palmed his hands thoughtfully as if he were offering a prayer. He looked at the ceiling for a long time with a tragic cast to his eyes. When he spoke it was hesitantly, as if it pained him, but with conviction . . .

"Buying trends are erratic these days, Dave. Tomorrow, demand might drop on a big item and I'd have a heavy inventory on my hands and no place to unload. It means you have to maintain a working capital."

Tom Wylie was sympathetic when he told him about most of his stock dying from rattleweed poisoning.

"That's mean stuff in March, Dave. Got to keep your stock out of it. You know, the best way to get rid of it is to cut the crowns a few inches below the soil surface. It generally won't send up new tops." He asked Boland if he had seen Timmons. And after that he kept his sympathy.

John Avery was in the hotel business. He was used to walls and space limitations. "If my cows got into rattleweed I'd put fences up to keep them the hell out. You got to organize, boy!" Avery's supper was waiting for him . . .

Virginia would understand.

Hell, what else could she do? He saw her pale, small-boned face that now, somehow, seemed sharper and more drawn with their child only a few days or a week away. She would smile a weak smile, twisting the hem of her apron—and it would mean nothing. Virginia smiled from habit. She smiled everytime he brought her bad news.

But always with the same sad expression in the eyes. Sometime, in the future, perhaps there would be a real reason to smile. He wondered if she would be able to. Now, with the baby coming . . .

Virginia had waited tables in a restaurant in Sudan because she had to support herself after her folks died suddenly. She was a great kiddier and all the riders liked her. Broadminded, they said. He used to pass through Sudan a few times a year when most of the Company herds were grazed up near the Canadian. After a while, he went out of his way and even made excuses to go there. She never kidded with him . . .

When he told the others about it, they said, "She's a nice girl—but who wants a nice girl? You get bone-tired pushing steers from the Nueces to Dodge; but, son, you can throw off along the way anytime you want—"

It had been raining hard for the past few minutes when finally he led his mare into the long, rickety shed, unsaddled and pitch-forked some hay.

The rain, he thought, shaking his head. The one thing I don't need is rain. He tried to see humor in it, though it was an irritation. Like an annoying, tickling fly lighting on a broken leg.

He walked up the slight grade toward the dim shape of the adobe house, passing the empty chicken coops, then skirted Virginia's vegetable garden, moving around toward the front of the house. He saw a light through a curtained side window. At the front of the house he called, "It's me," so as not to startle her, then lifted the latch on the door and pushed in.

Virginia Boland stood next to the oil-cloth-covered table. She twisted the hem of her apron—she did it deliberate-

ly, her fingers tensed white straining at the material—and her eyes were wide. No smile softened the pale, oval face. Her dark dress was ill-fitting about her narrow shoulders and bosom as if it were sizes too large, then rounded, bulging with her pregnancy to lose any shape it might have had before.

Boland said, taking his hat off, "I guess I don't have to tell you what happened."

"Dave—" Her voice was small, and now almost a whisper. Her eyes still wide.

He came out of his coat and brushed it half-heartedly before throwing it to a chair.

"I saw all of them, Ginny."

"Dave—"

He looked at her curiously now across the few feet that separated them . . . There was something in her voice. And suddenly he knew she wasn't saying his name in answer to his words. He moved to her quickly and held her by the shoulders.

"Is it time? Are you ready now?"

She shook her head, looking at him imploringly as if she were saying something with her eyes, but she didn't speak.

She didn't have to.

"Hello, Davie boy." The voice came from behind Virginia.

He stood in the doorway of the partitioned bedroom with the curtain draped over his shoulder. The white cloth dropped to the floor showing only part of him; damp and grimy, trail dust streaked and smeared over clothes that had not been changed for days. A yellow slicker was draped over his lower arm and his hand would have gone unnoticed if the long pistol barrel were not sticking out from the raincoat.

"Been a long time, hasn't it!" he said,

and came into the room carefully, lifting the slicker from his arm to drape it over a straight chair. "I almost didn't recognize little Ginny with her new shape." He grinned, winking at Boland. "You didn't waste any time, did you?"

Boland stared at the man self-consciously, feeling a nervousness that was edged with fear, but he made himself smile.

"Jeffy, I almost didn't recognize you," he said.

"Wait'll you see Red." His head turned to the side and he called to the bedroom, "Red, come on out!"

Boland looked toward the curtained doorway and then to the dirt-caked figure next to him. "I wouldn't have known you by sight, but your voice—"

"You didn't forget that Cimarron crossing two years ago, did you?"

"Of course I remember," Boland said. "You saved my life." He tried to show friendship and appreciation at the same time and smiled when he said, "What are you doing here, Jeffy?"

"You're a regular babe in the woods, aren't you?" His head turned again. "Red! Dammit!"

He hesitated in the doorway, leaning against the partition, and then came into the room, straining to move his legs and holding his arms tight to his stomach as if his insides would fall out with a heavy step. He was as filthy as the other man, but his grime-streaked, bearded face was sickly white and his jaw muscles clenched as he eased himself down onto the cot which stood against the side wall nearer the two men.

He leaned back until his head and shoulders were against the adobe, then blew his breath out in a low groan. He held his right elbow to his side protectively, and from under his arm a

dark, wet stain reached in a smear almost to the buttons on his shirt.

Boland looked at Jeffy who was leaning against their small table with his arms folded and the pistol pointing up past his shoulder and heard him say, "Red's sick."

He glanced at his wife who was holding her hands close to her waist and then he moved closer to the cot. "How are you, Red?"

The man shook his head wearily, but didn't speak.

Leaning over him, Boland said in subdued surprise, "That's a gunshot wound!"

Jeffy came off the table now and pushed Boland away from the cot. "You want to know everything," he said, and glanced down at Red. "Keep your eyes open. You're not that bad hurt."

"What's the matter with you!" Boland flared. "He's been shot clean through."

Jeffy shrugged. "Tell him something he doesn't know."

Boland turned on him angrily. "What happened! If you're going to dirty up my house, you're going to tell me what happened!"

"You're forgetting about that Cimarron crossing," Jeffy smiled. He was near forty with a thin, wizened face made lopsided by a tobacco wad; and now he took off his shapeless hat to show a receding hairline and a high, white forehead that looked obscenely naked because of its whiteness. He looked at Boland's wife, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Honey, he ever tell you how I pulled him out from under the cows? Deep water after a flash flood and they was millin' in the stream—" He grinned at her as if there was a secret between them. "You'd still be shaking your tail

in that Sudan hash-house if it wasn't for me."

"Saving my life doesn't bless anything you've got to say to my wife." Boland had felt the temper hot in his face, but he calmed himself. Now his voice was lower, but there was an edge to it still.

"And it doesn't give you leave to walk in my house with your gun out and start pushing everybody around. I know you're in some trouble. With your dirty mind and Red's drinking it could be almost anything. Now I'm telling you, Jeffy, start acting right or else move on."

Jeffy shook his head sadly. "That's some way to talk after all the time Red and me and you bunked together."

"What did you do, Jeffy?"

There was a pause, and his face became serious. "Held up a man Red shot him when he went for his gun."

"Where'd it happen?"

As suddenly as he had become serious, his face grinned again and he said, "You always did have a long nose." He looked over to the cot and said, "Red!" surprising the man's eyes open.

"I'm not going to tell you again. Keep your eyes open." He lifted his slicker from the chair and shrugged an arm into it. "Pull your gun and hold it on them while I take a look around. I might even go all the way toward town, so don't get jumpy if I'm gone a couple hours."

He started for the door, buttoning the slicker with one hand, then looked at Virginia. "Honey, you have some coffee on for when I get back. Like you used to." He grinned at her showing tobacco-yellowed teeth and shook his head reminiscently. "You sure used to throw it around in that cafe."

She looked away from him to her

husband. Neither of them spoke.

"Your joining society's changed you, honey. There was a time when we couldn't shut you up." They heard the rain when he opened the door, then the sound was closed off again and he was gone.

In the room's abrupt silence Red drew his pistol, but his hand fell to the cot and the fingers closed on the handle loosely. He did not cock it.

Looking at him, Boland tried to picture him killing a man. Neither he nor Jeffy were ever good citizens, he thought. But they never robbed or killed before. He had worked with them for a couple of years when he first started riding for the T. & N. M. Cattle Company and he had not particularly liked them then; but his dislikes were based on small, personal things—Jeffy always making dirty remarks, and Red getting sloppy drunk any chance he had. Both had been lazy and never did any more than they had to.

And now—they had to flop themselves right on top of his other troubles.

Virginia moved over to the stove and lighted the fire under the coffeepot. She said to him, "Are you hungry, Dave?"

He shook his head. "Not very." And I've got to worry about Ginny on top of all of it. And then he thought: or, are you feeling sorry for yourself?

"Are you?" Her head nodded to the man on the cot.

"I don't think I'd hold it."

Boland asked him now, "When were you shot, Red?"

"Yesterday, in Clovis. Somebody musta recognized me and told the marshal. He hit me by surprise."

"Right after you killed this man?"

"Hell, that was months ago in Dodge. We been hiding since. Went into Clovis

yesterday for grub and somebody seen us." He was breathing easier and went on, "We lost them last night. Damn marshal hit me by surprise—"

Boland said, "I suppose you were drunk in Dodge."

Red grinned sheepishly. "Fact is, I don't even remember shootin' the man."

"But Jeffy told you you did."

"Yeah, Jeffy said I was actin' mean and—"

"And lost your nerve and shot him when you didn't have to."

Red looked surprised. "Yeah. That's just what he said."

Boland waited, watching the man think it over. Then, "You starting to get any notions in your head?" It occurred to him then for the first time. He had been thinking Red was a damn fool hiding all that time because of Jeffy—unless his face was plastered all over the country. Otherwise, how would anyone in Clovis have known him? Then it hit him: a reward!

Virginia moved past him holding the coffeepot and a porcelain cup. She handed the cup to Red. "Try some coffee. Maybe you'll feel better."

"I don't think I'd hold it."

"Well, try, anyway."

He held the cup over his lap in his left hand and she leaned closer to pour the coffee. Suddenly she moved the pot to the side and emptied the scalding coffee on Red's gun hand.

His hand went up as he screamed and the gun flew over the foot of the cot, and in the instant she pushed the palm of her hand over his mouth forcing his head against the wall and muffing his scream.

Boland came up with the gun. He did it without thinking; and now, as he leveled it in Red's face he looked at

Virginia with disbelief in his wide-open eyes. They followed her as she moved across the room, replaced the coffee-pot on the stove and returned to stand awkwardly near the cot. She bit her lower lip nervously, watching the man.

The violent motion had ripped open his wound and now it was bleeding again. He hugged his arm to his side, groaning, with his scalded hand held limply in front of him.

Virginia's head lowered closer to his and she said, "I'm sorry," embarrassedly.

For another moment Boland continued to stare at her, but now with curiosity in place of surprise, as if he wasn't quite sure he knew this woman he had married.

He handed her the pistol. "Want me to cock it?"

"I can do that."

"If he budges, shoot him quick."

He moved toward the door and hesitated momentarily before turning back to Virginia. He kissed her mouth softly and looking into her face as he drew away, her features seemed not so sharp and pointed. And there was more color to her skin. He moved to the door anxiously, but glanced at her again before going out.

The rain had worn itself to a cold drizzle and there was no moon to make shadows in the blackness. He moved around the house slowly, cautiously, and hugged the adobe as he passed the garden. His pistol was in the saddlebag hanging in the barn-shed and now he thought: why in hell didn't I bring it in! No, then Jeffy would have it now. But he wouldn't know it was in the saddlebag. I've to get the gun—and then Jeffy. But where is he?

He reached the back of the house and crouched down in the dead silence,

looking in the direction of the barn-shed. He waited, listening for a sound, and after a few minutes he could make out an oblong, hazy outline. He thought of Virginia now and he didn't feel so alone. Even the business of the afternoon, when it crept into his mind, didn't cause a sinking feeling, and he went over everything calmly. It puzzled him, because he was used to feeling alone. He thought of the reward again...

He arose abruptly and sprinted across the back section toward the barn. He ran half-crouched, even though it was dark. At the side of the doorway, he pressed his back to the wall and listened. He waited again, then slowly inched his head past the opening. It was darker within. He stepped inside quickly and as he did, felt the gun barrel jab into his spine.

"You must be dumber than I thought you were," Jeffy said.

Virginia backed toward the table slowly, her free hand feeling for the edge, and when her fingers touched the smooth oilcloth she moved around it so that now the table was between her and the man on the cot. She did not take her eyes from the sprawled figure as she reached behind for the chair. There was a flutter of movement within her and she held the pistol with both hands, sitting down quickly. She trained the front sight on the man and saw it tremble slightly against the background of his body.

He closed his eyes suddenly, grinding his teeth together, and when he opened them they were dark hollows in his bloodless face. His mouth opened as if he would say something, but he blew his breath out wearily and moved a boot until it slid off the cot to the floor

His teeth clenched as it hit the flooring.

He brought his left hand over to the wound, his face tightening as his fingers touched the blood-smear of shirt that was stuck fast to the wound. It was still bleeding and now a dark stain was forming on the light wool blanket that covered the mattress.

She watched the stain spreading on the blanket where it touched his side and again she felt the squirm of life within her. She felt suddenly faint.

She remembered the afternoon her mother had given her the blanket and how she'd folded it into the chest with her linens and materials. She had seated herself on the chest then and clasped her hands contentedly, listing her possessions in her mind and thinking, smiling: now all I need is a husband. She had giggled then, she remembered.

For the bed, they used Dave's heavy army blankets. The cot served as a sofa and deserved something bright and dressy enough for the front room.

Red lifted his boot to the cot, and stretched it out tensely, and as the heel slid over the blanket a streak of sand-colored clay followed the heel in a thin crumbling line.

And then she no longer recognized the blanket. It became something else with this man sprawled on top of it. It became part of him with his blood staining it. And she saw the man and the blanketed cot as one. The wound was in the center. It was the focal point.

His face grimaced again with the pain and he groaned.

She said softly, "Haven't you done anything for it?"

He was breathing through his mouth as if his lungs were worn out and there was a pause before he said, "I stuffed my bandanna inside till it got soaked through, then I threw it away."

She stared at the bloodstain without speaking. Then, suddenly, she laid the pistol onto the table and went over to the stove.

Red watched her pour water from a kettle into a shallow, porcelain pan before reaching for a towel that hung from a wall rack. His eyes drifted to the gun on the table and his body strained as if he would rise, but as Virginia turned and moved toward him, he relaxed.

She caught the slight movement and stopped halfway to the cot, her eyes going from the man to the table. She hesitated for a moment, then went on to the cot where she knelt down, placing the pan on the floor.

She poured water on the wound and pulled at the shirt gently, working it loose. When it was free she tore the shirt up to the armpit, exposing the raw wound. It looked swollen and tender, fire-red around the puncture then darkening into a surrounding purplish-blue.

She looked into his face briefly. "Didn't your friend offer to help you?"

"He had to worry about getting us out."

"After he got you in."

Red said, irritably, "I've got a mind of my own."

She held the wet cloth to the wound then took it away, wringing the strained water from it. "Then why don't you use it?" she said calmly.

Red looked at her hard, then flared, "Maybe Jeffy was right. Maybe since you quit swingin' your tail in a hash-house, all of a sudden you're somebody else."

Virginia's head remained lowered over the pan as she rinsed out the cloth, squeezing it into the water. "You don't have any cause to talk like that."

She went to the wall rack and brought back a dry cloth and neither of them spoke as she folded it and pressed it gently against the wound.

And as she did this, Red's eyes lowered to the streak of clay on the blanket and he brushed it off carefully. He looked at the bloodstain and said in a low voice, "I'm sorry about your cover." He was silent for a moment and then said, almost dazedly, "I'm going to die—"

She made no answer and now his eyes lifted to her faded blond hair and then over her head to roam about the room. He was thinking about the soiled blanket and now he saw the raveling poplin curtains that looked flimsy and ridiculous next to the drab adobe. On the board partition there was a small print of a girl in a ballet costume, soft-shadowed color against the rough boards. And over by the far wall was the grotesquely fat stove, its flue reaching up through the low ceiling.

He said, "You got it pretty hard, haven't you?"

She hesitated before saying, "We get by."

"Well," he said, glancing around again, "I wouldn't say you had the world by the tail."

Virginia looked up quickly. There was a rattling of knocks on the door and from outside she heard, "Honey, give that gun back to Red like a good girl."

Jeffy came through the doorway prodding Boland before him. He glared at Red who was holding his gun on his lap carelessly. "You're some watchdog."

Red said nothing, but then he gagged as if he would be sick. He breathed hard with his mouth open to catch his breath and then seemed to sag within himself.

His eyes were open, but lifeless.

"It's a good thing I tested you out, Red."

Red was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Jeffy, did I shoot that man in Dodge?"

"I told you you did." He looked at Red curiously.

"But I don't remember doing it."

"How many things you've ever done do you remember?"

"I thought I'd remember killing a man."

Jeffy rolled the tobacco wad on his tongue, looking about the room. Then he shrugged and sent a stream of it to the floor. "I'm not going to argue with you, Red. I don't have time." He glanced at Virginia. "Honey, how'd you like to go for a ride?"

There was a silence then, and Jeffy laughed to fill it. "You don't think I'm going to ride out of here without some protection!" He looked at Boland. "Davie, would you take a pot at me with your woman hangin' onto my cantle?"

Boland's face was white. For a moment there had been a fury inside of him, but his brain had fought it and now he felt only a panic. There was a plea in his voice when he said, "My wife's going to have a baby."

Jeffy grinned at him. "All the more reason."

"Jeffy."

He glanced at Red who seemed suddenly wide awake.

"Jeffy, you're just scarin', aren't you?"

"What do you think?"

He looked at him, squinting, as if he were trying to read his mind. "You'd take that girl on horseback the way she is?"

"Red, if I had a violin I'd accompany

you." He started toward Virginia.

And with his movement the gun turned in Red's lap, a flash of metal, and the room filled with the roar as it went off. He cocked to fire again, but there was no need. He looked at Jeffy lying face-down on the floor and said, incredulously, "He would have done it!"

He let the pistol fall to the floor. "There," he said to Virginia. "Keep your coffeepot away from here."

Boland looked at Jeffy and then picked up the pistol. Virginia smiled at him wearily and sat down at the table, propping her elbows on it. He said to her, "Maybe you better get some sleep."

"Dave."

He turned to Red.

"I'm going to die, Dave."

Boland remained silent.

"Do me a favor and don't holler law until the morning. Then it won't matter."

"All right, Red." Then he said, "I don't want to sound like a gravepicker, but—how much have you and Jeffy got on your heads?"

Red looked at him, surprised. "Reward?"

Boland nodded.

"Why, nothin'. What made you think so?"

"You said somebody identified you in Clovis."

"Well, it was probably somebody used to know us."

Now that he had asked him, Boland was embarrassed. But, strangely, there was no disappointment and at that moment it surprised him. He grinned at Virginia. "I guess you don't get anything for nothing."

She smiled back at him and didn't look so tired. "You should know that by now."

For a few minutes there was silence. They could hear Red's breathing, but it was soft and even. Suddenly, Boland said, "Ginny, you know I haven't been home more'n an hour!"

Virginia nodded. "And it seemed like the whole, long night." Her eyes smiled at him and she said, softly, "When you're telling our grandchildren about it, maybe you can stretch it a little bit."

ONE-MAN GOVERNMENT

WILLIAM B. IDE bears the distinction of being the first, last, and ONLY president of California's Bear Flag Republic that was born at Sonoma, June 15, 1846, and died at Monterey when Commodore John D. Sloat raised the Stars and Stripes on July 7, 1846. Returning to his land grant in the upper Sacramento valley, Ide gave added proof of his versatility.

When Colusa County was formed in 1850, the county seat being then at the now vanished hamlet of Monroeville, Ide filled the following county offices: County Judge, Probate Judge, County Treasurer, County Surveyor, County Clerk, and *ex-officio* County Recorder and County Commissioner.

Just to prove that he was no flash in the pan as a one-man county government, Ide held down his jobs for almost two years. He died of smallpox on December 20, 1852.

—OLD HUTCH



The Killer Locomotive

By FREEMAN H. HUBBARD

107 looked as slick as a new pair of shoes when she came out of the yards, but she had more fatal wrecks than any other engine in Western history.

IN bygone days when steam power ruled the rails, many a locomotive was stigmatized as a jinx or even a killer, but not one of them piled up a more macabre record of fatal accidents than Number 107, the grim eight-wheeled monster of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad.

Driven, it seemed, by a fiend, this trim-looking engine had one disaster after another, thrusting into eternity a dozen railroad men and at least a score of passengers. The superstitious swore that she was haunted. They claimed that they could see by misty moonlight the phantom spirits of her victims, awful in aspect, seated in her wooden cab or gliding up from her pilot and wrapping themselves around the great, oil-burning, box headlight.

How she got that way, nobody knew. Her mechanism appeared to be flawless. Her burnished brass and copper flashed like fire in the bright Colorado sunlight. The mountain railroaders cheered and waved their caps that day in early March of 1888 when they first

caught sight of her, fresh from the Baldwin Locomotive Works at Philadelphia, as she entered the Denver yards of the narrow-gauge D. & R. G. after a cross-country trip on board a standard-gauge flatcar.

Her arrival opened a new era in Rio Grande history. Prior to that time every engine on the young railroad had been burning cordwood in her brick-lined firebox and belching sparks and clouds of smoke skyward through a diamond-shaped stack. The 107 was the first of three anthracite-burners built for the D. & R. G. with the same specifications. Her stack, therefore, was straight and tall.

Railfaring men grinned with pride as they eased the newcomer down a ramp onto the slim-gauge track. "She's a beauty," they said. They admired her shining brass and copper, the graceful lines of her Russia-iron jacket, and the gay red enamel that covered her wheels and cab exterior. Inside the cab, they gaped at the handsome smooth walnut

and ashwood veneer inlaid with a floral pattern.

The Denver & Rio Grande followed a treacherous, tortuous path through mountain gorges and across high bridges, the only iron trail that pierced the Rockies in that area until the tunneling of Marshall Pass. It was on the passenger run between Gunnison and Grand Junction in western Colorado that the 107 first saw service. The almost perpendicular walls of Gunnison Canyon, hewn out of rock when the world was in the making, echoed the banshee wail of her whistle and the resonant clang of her bell.

Picture, if you can, the new engine, as clean and polished as a pair of Sunday shoes, dragging a string of six or seven crackerbox coaches with open platforms at each end along a winding ledge, with a frothy dark river below and rock walls towering some two thousand feet above.

By night, kerosene chandeliers threw a stikly glow over the passengers, while sperm candles lit the mail and baggage car—candles that the sly engine crew swiped when they could to use as polish in giving the 107 a glittering sheen, for the hogger and his fireman had the responsibility of keeping their locomotive spic and span. Nor were the cab lights a thing to brag about. Their fitful kerosene rays streaked the crew with weird shadows, creating now and then ghostly illusions.

The iron horse could gallop a mile a minute when a hogger really took her bridle off; but he rarely did, for the corkscrew ribbons of steel, three feet apart, were not laid out like a race-track. The 107's maiden run over the division began on a chilly starless night. Bill Duncan, the first man to take a train over the Continental

Divide, sat with arrogant grace at the throttle. The firedoor clanked rhythmically as Josh Zugley, lithe and broad-backed, fed the white-hot maw with shovelfuls of black diamonds.

Number 107 was purring like a kitten. Bill opened her up a bit. Her exhaust cannonaded through the Black Eagle Canyon. The road curved so sharply and the headlight glared so dimly that the two men failed to see that part of a bridge had been swept away by a spring freshet. Too late, Bill slammed on the airbrake.

There was not even time to jump. His whistle was screaming a frantic signal for trainmen to set the handbrakes when the eight-wheeler plunged into the black water below. Half a dozen clattering cars played follow-your-leader into the river. That night, Bill and Josh signed the register in the Terminal beyond the sky, and nobody knows how many passengers perished. *The killer had claimed her first victims!*

For months, while snow melted and Indian pinks and anemones began to blossom on the slopes, Number 107 lay at the bottom of the gorge in the mountain stream. Then in late summer the water receded enough for a tolling, sweating and swearing salvage crew to drag the engine up from the river with the aid of Gargantuan chains attached to three wrecking cranes set on flatcars.

Taken to the Salida shops, she was overhauled. In November she went back on her run, and for two months she behaved like a convict on parole. The Rio Grande men sighed with relief.

On a still Christmas Eve, when the moon spilled purple shadows over the long and silent miles of fallen snow, William Godfrey pulled out of Gunnison at the throttle of 107. The fireman was a new man named Bell, making his

first run over the division. Crew and passengers alike were in a festive mood, planning to spend the holiday at Grand Junction.

Between Escalante and Dominguez, on Blindman's Curve, a ten-ton boulder broke loose from the bleak mountainside and toppled down to the track. There it stopped. The moon had vanished and thickly falling snow swirled around the engine. Godfrey peered out the cab window. Then he pulled in his head to shake the snow off his cap. For that reason he never saw the giant rock.

Christmas Eve suddenly became a night of horror. The wedge-shaped snowplow riveted to the pilot of 107 hit the boulder like a battering ram, derailing the little train. Engineer Godfrey and his fireman and several passengers died without knowing exactly what had happened.

For many years after that the roof of one of the coaches lay on the mountainside where it had fallen, but repairs on the bad-luck engine were completed in March, 1889. No man wanted to run her. All sorts of excuses popped up. Old heads came down with a mysterious illness when the callboy tried to sign them for the 107. Young fellows working on rusty switchers refused to take a promotion that entailed handling the killer. Everywhere the feeling gained ground that 107 was a hoodoo. Even the unsuperstitious hoggers fought shy of her. The brass hats tore their hair.

At length a newly promoted runner named Frank Bratt rashly volunteered to take her out. His seniority did not rate a passenger run, but nobody challenged his bid. Frank made two round trips with the 107. Only two.

On the bitterly cold night of March

11th, when a full moon bathed the Rockies with silver, the "Dread 107," as she was now called, steamed out of the sleeping town of Gunnison and passed safely, but probably not without shudders, Blindman's Curve where Godfrey and Bell and a few others had turned in their chips. In due time she headed downgrade into Black Eagle Canyon, scene of her first disaster.

Between Sapinero and the jagged peak known as Curecanti Needle—a scenic spot pictured on the D. & R. G. emblem—a heavy snowslide thundered down the slope, overturning the locomotive and crushing to death the engineer and his fireman. No passenger was hurt. Like the title of the old poem, "Nobody Killed But the Crew."

A wrecking gang dolefully hauled the battered 107 back to Grand Junction. By now she had become as popular as a rattlesnake with yellow fever. No hogger on the division could be argued or bribed into touching her throttle. The men told uncanny tales about her. They said the killer engine was haunted; wraiths clambered in and out of her wooden cab at night as she gathered dust and rust in the roundhouse, hated, feared and shunned. Word got around that young Frank Bratt had deliberately taken the 107 on its fatal run despite a premonition of tragedy that had come to him the night before.

For more than a year the killer stood idle. Finally, on orders from higher up, she was transferred to run farther west, between Salt Lake City and Ogden, in the hope that a new division would break the jinx; but she had to be deadheaded there, because no man familiar with her record would sit in the cab.

Even in Utah, on a run of about eighty miles through prairie country,

the 107 was often in trouble. If a steer or a mule managed to stray onto the right-of-way, she was sure to tangle with it. There was a common joke that she killed more hogs than Phillip Armour. But during her first two years in the Mormon State she did not get into anything more serious than two rear-end collisions with no casualties and a derailment that snuffed out the life of an unidentified hobo who'd been riding behind the tender.

Then the ballast-scorching "Mad Ole" Gleason was assigned to the hoodoo, which was still in passenger service. Gleason had been involved in half a dozen wrecks during his fifteen years of railroading but had never suffered more than a scratch. Friends claimed that he bore a charmed life. But he lasted only six months in the cab of Dread 107. His engine rammed head-on into a stock train—the kind of pile-up that railroaders term a cornfield meet—and Mad Ole perished, along with four other crew men.

Although she was little more than three years old, the killer came out of this collision so badly damaged that, after being repaired, she was relegated to freight service. It was around this time that an unknown hand carved on the beautifully veneered wood work of her cab the names of eight men who'd been killed in that cab, together with the dates.

This list reminded the 107's engineers to be ultra-cautious. For the next few years the killer's history was uneventful, except that misfortune seemed to dog the steps of all members of her engine and train crews—sickness, death and other forms of bad luck, all of which were attributed to the hoodooed 107.

Then on her sixth birthday, a Sunday

morning, the killer took another mad fling. She ran away from the Ogden yards while Tom Flynn sat at the throttle, with his brother Mike firing, and did not stop till she rolled over an embankment on a curve twelve miles distant. The trains which had been standing in her path were flagged in time for them to pull into sidings with only seconds to spare.

A terrible account of what had happened was told in sandhouses, crew rooms and cabooses. It was said that Tom had gone crazy from pondering over the carved death list and had fought with his brother while the engine was running away, tossing Mike out of the cab to die of internal injuries, and that he himself was found, a gibbering lunatic, pinned beneath the overturned locomotive.

When that story got out, the 107 was quarantined again. No hogger would go near her throttle. So the brass hats transferred her to Alamosa, Colorado, on the other side of the Rookies, and they had to deadhead her across the Continental Divide. In Alamosa she underwent a thorough overhauling. Her sinister death roll was eradicated and her number was changed to 100.

For several years, it was believed that the jinx had been lifted. But no! The old killer once more rolled into a ditch, after spring rain had undermined the track, scalding to death an engineer named Peters and crippling his fireman. Weirdest of all, the ditch water washed off the superimposed 0, restoring the original number 107.

Five years passed. During that time the hoodoo remained in the Alamosa roundhouse, used only in rare emergencies. Engineer Frank Murphy, who scoffed at superstition, seated himself at the throttle of 107 on a fair June

morning, with a fireman named Jenkins, fresh from eight weeks in a hospital, and highballed out of the Alamosa yard. He was taking a string of empty gravel cars to Mear's Junction to be loaded, and every telegraph operator along the line must have shuddered as he heard the dreaded number, 107, sputtering on the wire when the train orders were tapped out.

That night Frank Murphy started on his return trip to Alamosa with a heavy load of gravel. His route was all down grade and his orders called for meeting only two trains along the way. Six miles out of the junction, Murphy suddenly realized that his train was out of control. Shutting off steam, he applied the air and whistled desperately for hand-brakes.

There were three men aboard the

train. Not one of them lived to tell what happened. At the foot of the mountain the ponderously loaded runaway crashed into a light mixed train. The 107 overturned, live coals from her firebox setting fire to the wreckage. Before a rescue party could reach the scene, Murphy, Jenkins, their conductor, and the engineer and head brakeman of the mixed train had cashed in their chips.

After that, it would have taken a Winchester rifle to get any other hogger to handle the hoodoo; and so, in 1908, she was ignominiously hauled to the graveyard of dead locomotives. No man regretted seeing her scrapped. Her bronze bell was given to a small church in Colorado, maybe as an act of penance. Nothing else is left from the killer engine of the Rio Grande.

PIONEERS' PET NAMES

A Western Quiz

COLORFUL FRONTIERSMEN OF THE WEST, as well as outlaws and gunfighters, were often known by pet nicknames. In Column 1 are listed 15 such nicknames and in Column 2—scrambled, of course—the proper surnames to go with them, plus a clue for each in a word or two as to each man's occupation. Test your Old West history savvy by trying to match 'em.

Answers on page 144.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Little Phil | A. Wootten, New Mexico pioneer |
| 2. Shanghai | B. Custer, army general |
| 3. Rip | C. Carson, scout |
| 4. Parson | D. Bean, judge |
| 5. Uncle Dick | E. Sheridan, army general |
| 6. Yaqui | F. Smith, Texas Ranger |
| 7. Duke of Cimarron | G. Cody, scout |
| 8. Colonel Ike | H. Slaughter, Arizona sheriff |
| 9. Deaf | I. Pierce, Texas cattleman |
| 10. Buffalo Bill | J. Wallace, Texas Ranger |
| 11. Big-Foot | K. Maxwell, big land owner |
| 12. Pink | L. Ford, Texas Ranger |
| 13. Kit | M. Potter, Texas trail driver |
| 14. Yellow Hair | N. Higgins, Texas cattleman and feudist |
| 15. Law West of the Pecos | O. Pryor, Texas trail driver |

A NOVELETTE BY MARVIN DE VRIES

CHAPTER ONE

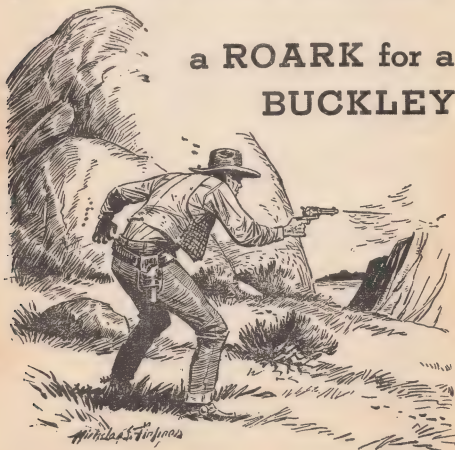
An Eye for an Eye

COE BUCKLEY led his sister by the hand along the narrow path, passing gravestones and unmarked mounds until they reached the Buckley plot. Then he gave her the tin can full of

water he had scooped out of Cowpen Creek and told her to put her flowers in it. "Don't spill the water, Lady," he told her. "I'm not going to fetch any more."

Her name was Laura, but they called her Lady because of her prim and proper ways. She was seven years old, and

a ROARK for a BUCKLEY



had gotten this notion of fetching spring flowers to Ranse's grave all of her own accord, and with her own odd brand of insistence had finally gotten Coe to make the pilgrimage. He was sure she had no sad feeling about it. She looked smug as a cat when she put the tin can down beside the headstone, going through a performance that pleased all her instincts of propriety without engulfing her in woe.

But then, Coe thought bleakly, I've got enough hurt for both of us.

His eyes settled on the wooden marker. He had carved it himself, with wrath and venom for a blade.

Ranse Buckley—it read, giving the

An eye for an eye . . . It was Old Testament Scripture and it was what Coe Buckley lived by—until a girl with hair like cornsilk turned the other cheek.



date of his birth and death—*Eye for eye, Tooth for tooth, Hand for hand, Foot for foot. Deut. XIX; 21.*

It was Scripture, dark Old Testament Scripture, and it spoke to him now as it had done the day he carved it, with all the rankle and spleen sorrow and dismay could muster. It was Scripture, and it was Indian lore, too, and it meant a life for a life, a Roark for a Buckley. "No more, no less, but just that much. A Roark for a Buckley." The words were a whisper on his lips.

"You through now?" he asked finally, and when Lady nodded, he led her away.

"I'm coming here every day," she said, primping the dust off her knees and skirt.

"Yeah," Coe said, "we can have a picnic sometime."

The path was narrow and winding. Halfway out, they met another visitor carrying flowers. She was a full-grown girl wearing a boy's gray shirt and blue jeans. Coe's eyes touched her, then darted away. He pretended he wasn't budging an inch off the path, but she got enough room to pass. Lady opened her mouth to speak, but Coe gave her arm a jerk and jolted her to silence. "That's Stefanie Roark," Coe told her when they were out of hearing.

"It is?" Lady sounded completely flabbergasted.

Coe nodded. "Did you think she would be wearing horns?"

"She looked straight at you."

"I can't help that."

"I wonder what she's doing here."

"The same as you. She's got a brother in here, too, the one who killed Ranse."

"Did Ranse kill him?"

"Yes."

"Then we're even."

"The Roarks started it. We're not even. Now keep still."

The cemetery was on the outskirts of town, and they rode the rest of the way in to do their errands. It was a small place, straddling the Ozark Cattle Trail that took Texas beef to northern markets. In season, it flourished with drovers' trade. One of these was in the mercantile buying supplies when Coe went in. The drover had a low opinion of the place and insisted on airing it. He bought two rifles and made clear what he intended to do with them. "Anybody looks cross-eyed at my stock and he'll get shot for it," he threatened.

Jason Henry, the storekeeper, tried to reassure him. "It's a rough up-and-down trail, and if your stock's a bit wild you're bound to lose some of it. Nobody's to blame."

"I hear different. You've got two factions here, the Buckleys and the Roarks, rustlers an' stampedeers, the lot of them, cuttin' each other's throats to get first whack at a herd."

Coe let Lady go and stepped forward. "My name's Buckley," he stated, with a flash of fire, "an' I don't like it spoken of in that way."

"Now, Coe," Henry begged.

"I don't speak for the Roarks," Coe went on, "but no Buckley ever stampeded a herd, and no Buckley ever will. We gather what you leave behind. That's our business, but we wait till you've left 'em behind. You got that clear?" Coe was twenty years old. He had flash and fire and a stiff pride that couldn't endure a slur. As long as Texas herds had come up this trail, he had gathered strays and bunch-quitters and cripples, disputing their possession with greedy Roarks, as Ranse had done before he was killed in his fight with Steve Roark, but he had never touched an animal that hadn't been abandoned,

and never intended to. "You got that clear?" he asked again.

The drover looked as if he had swallowed a horse. He mumbled a few words by way of apology, and Coe accepted it. "We'll be back later," he told Henry and led Lady out. The drover's horse stood at the hitchrack. It wore a Box A brand. Coe recalled seeing the dust of the herd in the distance when he came into town. Doc Covey passed by with his satchel and spoke to them. Lady found a friend from out Caw Flat way, and Coe left them together while he did his errands. He smelled a storm and tried to hurry. He saw Stefanie Roark again and tried to make out she was an ugly dowdy with her teeth falling out, but he couldn't make much headway with it. Her hair shone too brightly and she held her shoulders too straight and proud to make it stick. "Scoundrels, anyway," Coe's conscience told him, "all of them."

Zin Cane, a local tough, rode past and winked at Coe and leered knowingly, as if their thoughts met in regard to Stefanie Roark, but Coe gave back a blank stare. Zin took the road to Caw Flat, and Stefanie Roark followed a little later. Coe hurried with his errands, but by the time he was finished with them the sky was cloudy and threatening. "I think we're going to get wet," Lady said as they started for home.

"Likely," Coe agreed. "Do you mind?"

"No," Lady answered.

They hurried until they reached the slant leading down to the ford of Cowpen Creek. Then Coe called a halt. Stefanie Roark was halfway down the slant. She wasn't moving, and it looked as if she had been there for some time. She was trying to see ahead, moving her horse back and forth across the

road to get a better look into the willows along the creek. Coe, higher up on the slant, saw what was worrying her. It was Zin Cane, lurking in the bushes along the road; his horse pulled back out of sight among the willows. Coe made a fix on the spot where Zin was holed up and started down. At the bottom he halted again. "My horse is limpin'," he told Lady. "You go ahead. I'll catch up."

Lady went on over the ford. Coe got down and poked around in his mount's hoof with a jackknife. Zin Cane made a stir in the bushes, but Coe pretended not to hear. In a little while, Stefanie Roark came down and passed him by. She said, "Thank you," in a very small voice, and he pretended not to hear that, too.

He let her get a long start, because he didn't want to run into her again. Her soft-spoken "Thank you" was filled with humility and gratitude. It stirred up a thousand voices that tried to bubble up through the barricades he had built. But he wouldn't let them. The face he turned to the Roarks was made of stone, and so it would always be.

The storm broke over him before he got across the ford, and it was a black one. Wind, rain, and hail struck him with blinding fury. He lost sight of Lady. His stubborn horse wouldn't give him any speed into the bluster. Lightning hit the ground and fumes of scorch filled the air. He called out for Lady, but didn't get an answer. Then her horse bolted past, going the other way, but she wasn't aboard. He called again, but the wind threw it back in his face. Hail raked his skin, and blinded him. He tried holding a hand over his eyes and looking out between the fingers. The branch of a tree went over him like a cloud and brushed off his

hat. His horse turned cranky, but he kept it on the road.

He found Lady lying in a wagon rut. Her body blocked the water gushing down the rut, and it snaked off around her legs. She looked as if she had been dragged. There was an open stone bruise along her neck, and a smaller one higher up on her head. Her eyes were closed, her body limp.

He wrapped her in his jacket, and climbed his horse. Panic touched him. He thought she was dying. The Roark place was closest, and he turned in between the pine stumps at the gate. He let his horse go at the house and ran for the porch. The door opened and he tried to go in, but Mr. Roark blocked the way.

His look was friendly until he recognized Coe. Then it changed to hard thrusting animosity. "Get off this property," he ordered, pointing his finger, and started to close the door.

Coe leaned forward and gave it a hard push, forcing his way in. The lamp was lit. Stefanie was drying her hair. Brod, her twin brother, sat at the table. Mrs. Roark stood further back. Coe put Lady into Stefanie's hands, and she didn't refuse to take her. "I can't go on," he told them. "Take care of her. I'm going back for Doc."

No one spoke to him. Brod started to get up, but thought better of it and sagged down again. The others didn't move. Coe stepped out and closed the door behind him. He found his horse under shelter near the barn. It came out grudgingly with a bleak mistreated look, but Coe gave it a rake with his heel and put it back on the road to Summit.

In less than an hour, he returned with Doc in tow. The storm had let up. The clouds were breaking up. He took

the horses and let Doc go on to the house. Brod opened the door for Doc, but when Coe came, he was waiting on the porch and told Coe he couldn't come in. "You're not wanted here. Clear out." Brod's hair looked like raveled rope in the strange light that followed the storm. He wore a gun on his hip, and his eyes were as cold and harsh as a winter's sky.

"I'm going in," Coe answered him, and tried to push past.

Brod Roark grabbed him and pulled him back. Coe tried to hit him, but he missed his footing on the edge of the porch and fell to the ground. Brod jumped down after him. He didn't threaten with his gun. He went after Coe with his fists, and Coe fought back the same way, as though guns wouldn't satisfy their virulent deep-rooted hatreds.

But they didn't spare each other punishment. Skin peeled off Coe's fists, and his arm bones began to ache. The footing was bad after the downpour, and, as often as not, he stumbled head on into a blow. A length of porch board broke away when he fell against it with his knee and hit him in the face. A belated cloud spattered them with rain, and a cooling breeze kept busy around them. The sun showed briefly, then went down under, and true dark began to fall.

Brod's shirt hung in ribbons. His chest was bruised and muddy. Blood dripped off his nose. Coe's lips felt thick and numb. The inside of his mouth was raw. His gun had spilled into the mud. Brod lay on the porch. Once, he reached for it, but only to knock it farther out of reach, as if he didn't want temptation under his nose. No one came out. The noise they made might have been the wind nibbling at the loose edges of

the house, a horse chuffing and pawing in the yard, run-off going down to Cowpen Creek.

Brod's chest heaved, his breath wheezing like boots mired in the mud. He sagged down on the porch, and Coe pounded at his head. Brod struck back at Coe's hips and belly with slow-motion blows.

Then Doc stepped out. Stefanie came with him. "You get Brod inside," Doc told her. "I'll take care of this one." He took Coe by the arm and walked him to his horse.

"I got to get Lady out of there," Coe objected, trying to break away.

"No," Doc said, "she's staying there till I give the word. Climb up."

CHAPTER TWO

A Monkey Wrench in a Feud

COE'S mother was wispy thin. In Coe's eyes, and his father's, too, she was still beautiful to look at, and the smitten, helpless look he had put upon her face with his story didn't spoil it any. She busied her hands over him and his bruises, but her thoughts went to Lady at the Roarks. "She's only seven," she repeated several times. "Only seven."

"Coe," his father muttered, shaking his head in sheer stupefaction, "what on earth possessed you taking her there? You might as well have thrown her to a den of snakes. They'll leave her die."

"I went numb with fear. That's the only way I can account for it."

"You should've busted in."

"I tried. Don't I look it?"

"With your fists. That's no way to fight a Roark."

"I had no idea he was going to keep me out for good. I didn't think Doc would make her stay."

"She'll die of fright when she sees who she's among," Mrs. Buckley said.

"She's not afraid of anyone, Mom."

"I'm going to do something," Mr. Buckley stated.

"Doc said there was nothing to do. If we make a commotion, he won't take care of her. That's what he told me, an' you know him. He says she's got a fracture, her head's broke, and she can't be moved, not if the sky falls down. The thing on her neck isn't so much, except she bled a lot. Did her horse get back?"

"No."

"That's odd."

"Did she fetch the flowers to Ranse?" Mrs. Buckley asked.

"Yes, she did that." He was silent a moment, then went on with some comfort for his folks. "The place is clean, I could see that. They're not pigs. Stefanie looks like she might have a hand for tending her. She looks like she might be willing."

"They'll leave her die," Mr. Buckley predicted.

"She might feel she owes me something," Coe went on, and told them how he had helped her past Zin Cane on the way home. "She thanked me, so she knows what I was doing. She humbled herself that much."

"She'll forget it."

"I don't know. At any rate, I'm glad I did it."

"Of course," Mr. Buckley agreed, "it was the only thing to do. It wasn't as if you were helping a Roark. You were helping women-kind."

"I reckon."

Their talk went on a long time, but

every tack it took looking for some way to pry Lady out of the Roarks' hands ran head-on into Dr. Covey's blunt injunction. Coe got his supper and complained about his aching bones and went to bed. His final remark was, "I will say Brod fought fair."

The next morning he started back for Summit to see if he could talk Doc into relenting. Doc was full of sly fun, and Coe had a hunch he might think he was playing quite a joke by throwing a monkey wrench into a blazing feud. Coe at least meant to tell him it was nothing to prank about. "If I see that spark in his eye, I'll light into him," he promised himself.

Cowpen Creek was full of bluster after the cloudburst, and small feeders fretted and fumed their way across the road to join the fun. He passed the Roark place and was half inclined to turn in and have another wrangle, but he didn't want to put Doc in an uproar, and let it go by, content to let his mind sputter at them from a distance.

At the salt lick, he caught sight of cattle and identified them as Box A stock. Farther along, he ran into more, a solid bunch that looked like they were being driven, but he didn't see any riders. They were moving in a southwesterly direction toward the timbered country beyond the sandstone hogback. Knowing how busy Box A would be getting its herd together again, he tried to give them a hand by turning this bunch back, and almost got shot for it. The first bullet, a long-range rifle shot, hit his hat, and the second one fluffed the air close to his ear. The bunched stock, still edgy from earlier spooking scattered again, and Coe cleared out. If Box A was on the prod, they could mind their own stock.

Town wasn't far away. Dr. Covey's

house was at the far end. Going past the mercantile, Coe saw Lady's horse at the hitchrail. The Box A drover was sitting on the gallery behind it. Zin Cane sat beside him. Coe went over to claim the horse. The two men got up, the drover with a black look on his face. "My herd was stampeded last night," he charged. "That animal did it. This gent"—he pointed at Zin Cane—"says it's yours."

"It belongs to my sister," Coe answered. "It bolted in the storm and threw her."

"That's right," Zin Cane put in, "and I saw Brod Roark with that animal in tow after the storm. He probably used it to spook the Box A herd and throw the blame on you, Coe."

The drover looked surprised. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he asked.

"You get too hot an' bothered, mister. You don't give a man a chance to speak his piece."

Coe got down. He gave Zin a puzzled look. Zin looked earnest as a parson in the pulpit. The drover cooled off a little. "Your stock's all over creation," Coe told him. "I saw some coming in." He told the drover where.

The drover exploded profanely and rode off, leaving Lady's horse behind. "Hot enough to burn," Zin remarked, with a sly grin. "Sit down, Coe."

"What ails you?" Coe asked him with scant civility.

Zin wanted to please. "Except for me, Coe, you would've had trouble with that drover, gun trouble right here in the street."

"That shouldn't worry you," Coe answered, but he sat down.

"Them Roarks are gettin' too hawg-ish," Zin went on. "Did you say who was drivin' that stock at the lick?"

"No, I didn't say who, and I didn't say it was being driven, but it was, and whoever was driving it took a shot at me."

"The Roarks," Zin stated. "You know my two boys, Spinner and Dode?"

"I've seen them around," Coe admitted. "I didn't know they were your boys."

"We work together," Zin said, getting into his stride. "Now, look, Coe, you see what the Roarks are up to. They stampeded that herd and tried to throw it onto you. If I hadn't seen what I seen, you'd be curlin' your toes out there in the mud. They've told me to keep my hands off that herd, an' they'll tell you the same with a gun. They did already out there at the lick. It all adds up to somethin' we got to buck, you and me, and Spinner an' Dode. We do an honest business, like you, an' we don't want the Roarks to spoil it all. They got to go, and between the four of us we can put 'em on the run. We'll drive 'em clear outa the country."

"I wouldn't touch any Box A stock until the drover's gathered what he can find," Coe stated.

"Me, either," Zin said, righteously. "We don't want nothin' except a chance to make an honest living. That's the way we all look at it, except them damned Roarks."

Coe was ready to believe anything anyone said against the Roarks, even if, as he himself had told his folks, Brod had fought fair in their fist fight, but a partnership offer from Zin Cane, who had dark and stealthy ways and rode the dark and stealthy trails, was something he couldn't swallow, and he declined it in his mind. But aloud, he said, "I'll think on it. Now I got to go."

"You think hard," Zin told him, with the hint of a threat in his voice.

"There's lots of angles to it."

Without an answer, Coe went on afoot. A fat Cherokee squaw, with a papoose in her arms, was waiting on Doc's porch. Doc poked his head out and told her to come in. Coe waited outside. The livery-stable hostler went by and spoke to him from the street, telling him how sorry he was to hear about Lady's accident.

"Thank you, Chaunce," Coe said.

"You musta been in a fit to take her to the Roarks, Coe."

"I was," Coe admitted.

The hostler waited hopefully for more, but none came, and he went on. A little later, Brod Roark rode up. When he saw Coe, he stayed outside the gate. Even at that distance, Coe could see some marks of the fight on his face. *I should've tore his ears off*, Coe thought angrily, forgetting by now what an even standoff it had been. Brod looked jumpy, and Coe became worried. "You looking for Doc on account of Lady?" he called out finally.

"I'll tell Doc what I'm here for," Brod answered, with blistering arrogance.

Coe smoldered. He couldn't say any more without demeaning himself, but demeaned or not, he had to add, "Go on in. It's only a squaw in there. If you won't let her own brother do for her, it's up to you to do what he would do."

"If I did what he did, I'd be up at the cemetery right now, tearin' up that damned marker you got up there."

"You better not."

"Ours was tore up. I can guess who did it." He left his horse and came to the gate, then through it and halfway up Doc's walk, planting his feet solidly, waiting for Coe to come the rest of the way.

Coe obliged. "I got a few things to say myself," he called as he came forward. "I was shot at this morning, twice, at the lick, by some bushwhacker rustling Box A stock. That somebody was you. Last night, you took Lady's horse and stampeded the herd with it. That's no wild talk. I know."

Possibly, an outsider, watching them square off like roosters in a barnyard, would have grinned, but it was deadly business. They were through with fist fighting. They were through with everything except that last swift grab for their guns.

Coe watched Brod Roark's shoulder where the first telltale sign would come from. His own arm was crooked a little, froze like that until Brod's slightest move broke it loose.

At such close quarters, it was likely both would take on lead, but the one who moved the fastest with a straight shot was likeliest to survive. This then was what the long feud had finally brought them to, to the roar of guns that would mock them both, perhaps, if they were lucky, giving Doc another handful of work that would keep him too long from Lady's needs. This last thought daunted him, and fear touched his eyes, the bleak fear of giving Brod Roark something to crow about. But he took the step, a backward step that took him off the walk and gave Brod enough room to pass him by. "Go on, get him," Coe said and turned away.

Doc had probably seen some of it. He came out, glowering and hurrying, his satchel in his hand. "To your place, Brod?" he asked.

Brod nodded. "You'd best hurry, Doc."

They went away together, and Coe went back to the porch and sat down a while.

CHAPTER THREE

Fancy Doin's

ZIN CANE had a wen on his temple that was a handy thing to take hold of and worry with his fingers when he had to think, when events and circumstances had to be twisted to suit his needs, and when new notions had to be worked into shape and set afoot. It was a thoughtful pose, and he imagined Spinner and Dode were impressed. They ought to be, the dummies. He was impressed himself, sometimes. Grabbing that spooked horse and sending it into the Box A herd on a dead run with stirrups flopping wasn't bad. That planted the stampede on the Buckleys, and then to pull the Buckleys out of it by claiming he had seen Brod Roark with the animal set him up with Coe Buckley, something he had been trying to manage for some time. Kicking down the Roark headstone in the cemetery was another item that would burn somebody. He told Spinner and Dode all this and told them there was still more to do. "We're goin' to keep them stirred up till somebody gits killed. If it's a Buckley, the Roarks did it. If it's a Roark, why the Buckleys did it."

"S'pose nobody gets killed," Spinner said. "I notice they don't start in on each other very fast."

"Yeah, who does all the killin'?" Dode chimed in.

"Bushwhackers," Zin Cane said, "just bushwhackers." He looked up with mild innocence. "Who else?"

Dode didn't get the splitting humor. "All I know is, we ain't makin' no time with that Box A stock," he complained.

Zin explained that "That's just a drop in the bucket to what I'm lookin' at. There'll be a lot more herds come through an' once we get the fool Buckleys an' the Roarks with their crazy notions of what's right an' wrong out of our hair there's no end to what we kin do."

Dode kicked at the fire with his boot-heel and sent up a spray of sparks. "Pretty fancy doin's, all this," he grumbled, "but what is it, grudge talk or business talk?"

"All business. Nobody's got a grudge against anybody."

"Coe Buckley butted into your big play for Stefanie Roark the other day over on Cowpen Creek. How does that count?"

Zin flushed. "You lowdown snoop."

"How does it count?"

"Not a bit," Zin blustered. "I can git her any time, and he'll keep outa my way once I got all this fomenting right. The fact is, I almost got him talked into throwin' in with us." He saw objection from both of them and added, "He knows this country, all the places where stock holes up, and we can use him. We'll make a killing, and it'll all be legal kind of, once we git a herd stampeded. I spoke to him yesterday an' he's thinkin' on it right now."

"Sure fancy doin's," Dode repeated, "but I want to know what you're fomentin' about, cows or girls."

"I'm no fool," Zin stated.

"That's what you say," Dode told him. He glanced at Spinner and gave him a sly wink.

Zin's anger flared. Those two always stuck together against him. If the time ever came when he had a real bunch to ride at his heels, he would ram that kind of talk back down a man's throat. He would shoot a man for less, if he

had 'em to spare. But not now. "Look, boys," he wheedled, "let's don't jaw. We got to pull this off right. I see how it'll all come out, and if you dopes don't, you better take my say-so. And, from now on, every time you see somebody to talk to, I want you to spread some news about the Buckley kid-who's at the Roarks'. Everybody's wonderin' about it and they'll listen with both ears and pass it along. Lay it on thick an' make it bad."

"F'r instance?" Dode asked.

"F'r instance, you heard from so and so that so and so said that so and so called on the Roarks, an' that poor little tot, the Buckley kid, I mean, was lyin' there on the bed an' she didn't have a stitch on, no nightie, no blanket, no nothin', an' they seen goose pimples all over her. Ain't that awful. Little things like that, I mean. An' she was moanin' and groanin' an' askin' for a drink of water an' they didn't do a thing for her, the dirty rats."

"How's she goin' to ask for water when she's unconscious all the time?" Dode stated.

"Who knows she's unconscious, except Doc, an' mebbe he's coverin' up for the Roarks because he don't want the Buckleys to blow up. Say they don't feed her. Rats come in at night and run over her. The cats claw her. They stick pins into her in a joking way, the Roarks do. Anything goes. The Buckleys'll swallow it, because they want to believe the worst about the Roarks. It may stir up a shoot-out all by itself, and that'll save us trouble. Save us hirin' some bushwhackers, eh?" He grinned at both Dode and Spinner, but got no more than a dead look in return.

"Fancy doin's," Dode said again, "but we kin try."

Coe Buckley soon heard some of these tales, from friends and well-wishers, and some from enemies pretending to be friends. He heard them from Zin Cane, and from Spinner and Dode directly, and he believed what he heard because it was about the Roarks.

"I wouldn't put much stock in it, Coe," Jason Henry, the storekeeper, advised him. "You know how folks talk, especially that Zin Cane."

"Oh, I don't know," Coe said. "Zin saved me some trouble with that Box A drover."

"That reminds me," Henry said, "that drover was in before they pulled out, and he said they were leaving more than a hundred head behind. If I were you, Coe, I'd forget about the other and get busy rootin' out that stock. It's quite a big thing."

"I don't want any of it. It was stampeded and I won't touch it."

"But you didn't stampede it."

"No, the Roarks did. But there's a suspicion against us and I won't touch it."

"The Roarks are going after it."

"Yeah, they would. They'd do anything. They're letting Lady die."

Jason Henry made an impatient gesture. "Now, listen to me, Coe. That's all cheap talk. Brod was in here himself; he's heard some of it, and he was mad, too. Why, if it was only half true, the Roarks couldn't hold their heads up for half a minute. They're not monsters, you know. They've got an obligation, and I think you'll find they're carrying it out."

"How can I find out?"

"Go ask Doc. He knows."

"Doc likes this mess. He's fixed it this way half a-purpose, thinking it'll make us beholden to the Roarks so we'll have

to do under to them from now on. There's where he's wrong. They mistreat her and they'll pay for it. Just wait'll she gets outa there."

"It's no use talking, Coe," Henry told him with a long sigh, and went on with his work.

Coe, of course, dogged Doc's heels all week long, and he went there again, and Doc, as always, told him in detail just what Lady's condition was. Her skull was fractured and she was still in a coma. He had hopes she would come out of it. The bones were knitting, and once she came to, he felt their worst troubles were over. She was being well-treated. Nobody could have done more for her than the Roarks were doing, especially Stefanie, who was as gentle as a mother.

"That's what I'm telling you, Coe, and it's the truth, and it'll be the truth in spite of all the talk you hear. Those people are no worse and no better than you Buckleys, and I wish you would sit down and think about that and ask yourself what you would do if you had a Roark at your place. When you answer that, you've got the truth, and once you've got it, for God's sake, hang onto it."

It was a lecture that Coe threw over his shoulder as fast as it came, and when Doc noticed what was happening, he exploded with a "damnation to all of you," and stormed away.

The livery-barn hostler, a friend of Jack Dode although Coe didn't know it, called him in to hear another tale. Probably, he actually believed what Dode had told him, or Dode had told him to pass the word along. "I think you ought to know, Coe," he said, gravely, "about Lady, you know.

T'other night a friend of mine came past the Roarks, and they were all outside in the yard jawin', Brod, his maw an' paw, an' Stefanie, jawin' about her. They were expectin' Doc an' they figured they ought to have her lookin' decent for the call. Seems she was lyin' there stark naked, flies an' such, too, an' they thought she ought to be put into a nightie so Doc wouldn't complain. None of them wanted to bother, but Brod finally took hold. The nightie was on the line outside, and this friend of mine saw Brod take it down, and go in. Brod, mind you. They made a kind of a joke of it between them. How do you like that?"

Coe's eyes turned dark as night. A twitch exploded on his face. His fist slammed against the wall. The hostler backed off. "Don't carry on like that, Coe," he muttered. "That don't help any."

"All right. All right, Chaunce." Coe turned and went out, stumbling across the road like a drunk. He grabbed his horse away from Henry's hitchrail and stormed out of town, seeing nothing until he reached the pine stumps at the Roark gateway. There he pulled his horse into cover and went the rest of the way on foot, keeping to the brush along the driveway, uneasy about the one small window that faced him from the house. He crossed the open yard and flattened out against the house, listening. Then he worked his way around to the porch where he had had the fist fight with Brod. The door stood part way open. He heard Stefanie's voice inside, and the grudging respect he had for her touched him again. It had an odd daunting effect on him, sapping his anger and determination, but he pushed it away and stepped in with his gun in his hand.

He caught them all unawares. Roark, a long lean man with stooped shoulders and severe complaining eyes, stood farthest away. Mrs. Roark had a pan of water in her hands and let it drop to the floor. Brod wasn't there. Stefanie said, "You can come in."

"I am in," Coe told her, his voice louder than he wanted it to be. "I'm taking it over. You can all clear out."

Stefanie gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. You all clear out of here till this thing is over, one way or the other. I won't tolerate any more harm to her." He canted his head toward the bedroom.

"We haven't done her any harm."

"I won't argue." He lifted the muzzle of the gun toward Roark. "Get 'em out."

Roark walked around him, giving him a wide berth. Coe stepped forward, afraid they might all jump him at once, but before he got out of reach, Roark lunged and grabbed the gun. The weapon let out a roar and put a hole in the ceiling. Roark tried to get a better hold and lost the one he had. Coe shoved and sent him sprawling to the corner. "Don't think I wouldn't shoot," he warned. "Don't think it a minute."

"He's crazy," Stefanie said with quiet conviction. "We'd best go."

"I'm not crazy," Coe spouted. "This is the first sensible thing I've done in a week. Now clear out."

They went out without another word, but once outside Mr. Roark got cranky and carried on. Stefanie took charge, helping hitch the team to the buckboard. Coe watched from the window. He knew they had kin on the Cherokee Trace where they could go. At the last minute, Stefanie backed off and made

her folks go on alone. Then she came to the house. "May I come in?" she asked at the door.

"Yeah, come on," Coe muttered, sourly.

"You don't know what to do for her," she explained to Coe.

"I mean to get my folks. We'll find out from Doc."

"I'll show you. I can ride out later." She sounded good-natured, as if this weren't half the outrage Coe considered it, and once again Coe felt his anger going to pieces.

He holstered his gun, and she took him into the bedroom. Lady looked like she was napping. The bedding was fresh, and the bandage at her neck was white as snow. She wore a nightie all right, with ribbons on it, probably one Stefanie had outgrown. The ironing lines still showed on it, and another one lay on the dresser. Her clothes hung on a peg, all washed and ironed.

Coe got a lump in his throat. This was all as Doc said. He had come upon them unawares, and this was how it was, contradicting every word of gossip he had heard. He touched Lady's face with his finger tips and felt her breath against his hand. He walked to the window, trying to cling to the black hate that had brought him here but it poured away like water. "Do you think she's going to get better?" he asked.

Stefanie nodded immediately. "She must." Emotion choked her and she turned away.

"Where's Brod?"

"He's out after Box A stock." She hesitated briefly before she told him.

Coe's anger sparked again. "Oh, yeah, naturally."

"Yes, naturally," she agreed, "after we got your threatening note."

Coe looked surprised. "You didn't get any threatening note from me."

"Yes, we did. It said we were to keep our hands off Box A stock. It was signed C.B." She went into the next room for it, and showed it to him. "Those are your initials."

Coe frowned. "I didn't write that." The words were printed in clumsy block letters on a piece of store paper. "Besides, I don't care who goes after that stock. We don't want it."

"Brod didn't either until that came."

Lady made a small choking sound in her throat and Stefanie moved toward the bed. Evidently, it was something that occurred regularly. She knew what to do, but she needed help. "Turn her over and hold her forehead in your hand," she told Coe. "Be very careful."

Then she dipped a swab into a cup of water and thrust it carefully far back into Lady's throat. She was deft and gentle, and Coe watched her hands and her intent face and the throb at her throat, and another surge of dismay took hold of him. His hands trembled, and his eyes blurred.

"Now put her back," Stefanie said finally, and dropped the swab in a paper bag. "You'll have to do that quite often. She chokes up with phlegm, and this helps. This is salt water in the cup, and here are extra swabs."

"I—I don't think I could do that."

"Brod does when I'm asleep, and he's gentle, too."

Coe looked at the heap of swabs. They were carefully made from supple green willow twigs with the bark stripped off. A small tuft of clean raw wool, silky smooth, was fastened to the end with silk thread wound around the twig. "Where did those come from?" he asked.

"Brod made them."

"Lord God," Coe breathed, and swung away so she couldn't see his face. "You should've told us. You should've let us see. I've got to go. I'll overtake your folks and send 'em back. I misjudged you all." It was the hardest thing he had ever been obliged to say, and he kept his head down while he spoke; "I'll tell my folks how things stand here. None of us will ever do you any harm again. I speak for all of us. Paw, too. I'll see to that."

He gave Lady a last look and went out. Stefanie went to the door with him, and she asked him if he would come again. Something in the words made it an invitation, an invitation from the heart, and a bold confession that the silence had been too long for her.

Coe looked into her eyes a long time. Finally, he said bleakly, "I don't know." It was an honest bitter-tasting answer. He felt now as if he might never again be able to lift his head high enough to come.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shootout

COE followed the Roark buckboard, then he thought of a short cut, and left the road. His conscience tortured him. To face his folks with what he had to say daunted him. It was intolerable to face the future and always stand beholden to the Roarks, but he couldn't see any other way open. He had to find some gentler words to carve upon another headstone for Ranse. He had to find his lost pride before he could go where his heart was leading him.

He crossed the creek and went up the slant out of the bottom land. At the top, he ran into Box A stock. He counted five head. Beyond them stood Brod Roark's paint horse. Jack Dode was holding it. Brod wasn't aboard. A teeter-legged calf straddled the saddle. Zin Cane and Spinner were off to one side, searching the brush along the edge of the dropoff. "Brod Roark in trouble?" Coe asked Dode. He noticed a blood smear along the paint's flank.

"Damn tootin'," Dode muttered. "He had word to keep his hands off Box A stock and he ain't doin' it."

"I didn't know you could speak for stray stock," Coe said. "I thought you had to dig it out." He saw now where the warning note to the Roarks had come from.

"You think your way," Dode told him sourly. "We'll think ours."

Coe's eyes went back to the blood smear. "Did Brod get shot?"

Dode was briefly amused. "Yeah, right in the prat. He fell off his horse here and dug out over the edge." He lifted an indolent hand toward Zin Cane and Spinner. "They're tryin' to locate him."

Coe swung his horse and moved toward them. Zin Cane came to meet him. "You kin give us a hand here," he said.

"If I wanted to," Coe answered.

Zin gave him a closer look. "This is right up your alley."

"No," Coe told him. "The fact is, I'm sidin' him." The strange words startled Coe almost as much as they did Zin Cane. "That's it," Coe added, with growing conviction. "Keep it straight."

Zin glared and started to cuss. "Okay," he howled, finally. "That cooks you, too. Spinner!"

Coe stood his ground. Zin Cane moved a little, putting Coe in a bad

spot, with Spinner coming at him from behind. But Zin Cane wanted it all his way and called Dode, who left the paint and came in on foot. "It could be you and Brod had a shootout here," Zin crowed. "That's how it'll look when we git through. You ain't got a lick of sense, Coe."

Coe didn't answer. Beyond Dode, he saw the paint horse move toward the dropoff. The calf bawled. Dode stopped suddenly and fired a shot. Coe thought he was firing at the horse until he saw Brod Roark push through the brush and make a lurching run for his animal. Dode swung back trying to cut him off. Brod reached the paint and tried to get aboard, but couldn't make it. He tried a second time, but fell backward again. This time, he stayed on his back on the ground.

Coe jumped his horse from a standstill to a dead run. Zin Cane fired a shot. Spinner tried one from farther off. Both of them took after him. Dode kept after Brod. Brod pushed up on his elbow and fired one shot, then sagged back again. His try didn't do any good. Dode saved his lead until he could almost touch Brod with his gun, but Coe ran him down before he could fire the shot.

Then Coe got it from all sides, Dode from the ground, and Zin Cane and Spinner from behind. He sent his horse at Dode again. Dode rolled, trying to get out of reach, firing through a churn of sand. Coe whipped his gun down at him and pulled the trigger. The shot tore Dode apart, his legs and arms turning to slack rope, his head wobbling. A frenzied broken screech came out of his mouth. Then he sprawled flat, burrowing down as if for comfort, as if he knew it would be a long time, and never moved again.

A shot touched Coe on the arm, another struck his leg. One scored his saddle horn. Brod turned to push himself up again, but couldn't make it. He rolled and tried to trigger his gun, using both hands, but he couldn't hold it up.

Spinner, the most cautious, the farthest off, got it next. He was near the edge of the dropoff. The bullet lifted him out of the saddle and threw him over the edge, dropping him fifty feet down to the clutter below. Zin Cane lost his nerve when he saw it and dug out. Coe took after him, but his horse stumbled and threw him. When Zin Cane saw it, he swung around and came back, moving at an angle, his leg hooked over the saddle horn, his body hidden.

Coe got his feet under him, and his gun to roaring. One shot must have hit Zin's crooked leg. He sagged farther down on the off side. His head showed. His fist dug into the horse's mane. Coe fired again and again. Zin kept on slipping inch by inch. Ten feet away, he lost his hold and crashed. Coe went to look at him, and he stood beside him for some time. Zin was stone dead, with a bullet hole in his head right alongside the big wen. His leg wasn't hit at all. "Why, he must've got it way back there," Coe murmured, and turned away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Even Up

A MAN doesn't need much luck, if it comes at the right time and place, as Coe's had done. He thought he had had his share of it for years to come, but a little more would help

as soon as Brod Roark came to and found out where he was. He lay sprawled out on Coe's bed, and Coe sat beside him waiting for the faint stir that ran through his body to come to something. Coe had made a deliberate choice, to take him here instead of to his own place, so that, as time went on, it might be hard for anyone to say who was beholden to whom. He wondered if Brod would accept it, or whether he would bellow and roar till he got out.

Coe heard a rider outside, and thought it would be Doc, but a moment later, he heard Stefanie Roark at the door telling his mother that Lady had come out of her long sleep and was asking for her. "We would be obliged if you came, so as to content her," Stefanie said. "Our door is open, as it should have been before this."

Mrs. Buckley's voice was lost in emotion, but it steadied at last and raced through the yard. "Martin, hitch the horses. Quick. We're going to the Roarks'." Then it settled down again. "You come in and see your brother."

Stefanie said it was kindly. Coe stepped aside to let her come into the room, letting his eyes rove over her, noting the color and sparkle of her hair, like silk on the corn, the set of her shoulders showing her pride, the round fullness of her breasts that gentled all of it. Neither of them spoke, letting these small beginnings have their own way, but she looked at him with gentle eyes.

He went out to help with the horses, and tried to hint how his father ought to act when they got there.

"I'll fetch her home," Mr. Buckley said stiffly.

"You leave that to Doc," Coe told him. "You take a look and see what

they do for her, and then come home here and help do the same for Brod."

"They're not hurt the same way."

"That's no matter. You hear?"

"I'll see, I half promise. Go say I'm ready."

Coe went back and got his mother on the way. Stefanie stayed a while longer in the bedroom. Coe waited in the kitchen. When she came out, he walked with her to her horse. "I'll catch up before they get there," she told him. "Doc's waiting till I get back."

"Then your folks didn't get home?" he asked.

"No, not yet, but it's no matter. They'll enjoy the visit."

"I want to say we'll take care of Brod the best we know how."

"We'll have no concern about that." She said Brod had come to while she was in the room, and she had told him where he was.

"What did he say?"

"Not much. He said you did it a-purpose."

"What did you say?"

"I said I thought so, too." She looked at him and let her eyes smile.

"I thought it would even things up," Coe replied.

"You did more than that when you took his part in the fight."

"I couldn't stomach Zin Cane's doin's, that's all. That was my own affair."

"It looks like our affairs and yours run together." She made a mis-step mounting her horse, and Coe caught her. Her hair brushed his face, and her body touched his, hard and close for a moment, and then she got aboard. Before she rode away she gave him a look that puzzled him completely with its mixture of fun and gravity, but he solved it on the way back to the house. "She did that a-purpose, too, a-purpose

to touch me, to have me touch her," he crowed. As soon as he got inside the jubilation died. "That ornery Brod's going to spoil it all, though."

Brod had his eyes open. Due to the circumstances, he was lying flat on his stomach, his head twisted to one side. He looked sulky. "I hear you got shot, too," he remarked.

"Nothing much," Coe told him. "Close enough to scare is all."

"I saw you get all three. I saw that."

"I was showin' off," Coe said. He was trying to get a grin out of Brod, but it wouldn't work.

"I still can't see how anybody could get shot where I did when he's sittin' in a saddle."

"There's worse places," Coe said.

"Name one."

"Plumb in the head."

"I don't know. This is a laughing matter. It hurts my pride."

"Nobody's laughing."

"Wait'll they hear about it in Summit." He twisted his head the other way. "Stefanie said she was going home an' make your old man kiss mine. Leastways, shake hands. What d'you think of that?"

"I think it would be a good idea."

"On account of you and Stefanie?"

"That's in it, but that's not all of it."

"You think she can do it?"

"I think she can do anything."

A long silence from Brod worried Coe, until he mentioned the Box A stock drifting around with no place to call home. "It worries me," Brod said. "I won't be much good for a while in the saddle, but maybe we could work out some kind of a deal between us."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Coe agreed.

He met death in the Johnson County War—met it alone and memorably.



Powder River Diary

By W. H. HUTCHINSON

THE stocky, sandy-haired form lay grotesquely sprawled and still under the thin April sun while the drumming echoes of the shots that had cut him down were swallowed up in the whisperous flames that still licked redly through the shell of the burned-out house behind him. The men who had fought all day to kill him gathered around his body with mixed expressions as one of them bent swiftly to claim the rifle by the body and then methodically searched the corpse.

There was not much of interest—only the odds and ends a man carries that lose all meaning after he is dead, including a small memorandum book in a vest pocket. Even the book was nondescript—a prosaic record of calves tallied, debts owed, and the like—until the

pages became a penciled recital of what that day had been to the man who wrote them.

Me and Nick was getting breakfast when the attack took place. Two men here with us—Bill Jones and another man . . .

It had been good dark when the Regulators had pulled up on the high ground overlooking the rundown buildings on the bench above the Middle Fork of Powder River. A mellow, yellow light came through the window facing them. The agitated squeals of a hard-played fiddle rose up to smite their ears. A dog barked uneasily in the space between house and barn.

Major Frank Wolcott, ex-cavalryman turned rancher, passed back the word

for Mike Shonsy, range foreman for the Western Union Beef Company, to join him. The two men held hurried conference and came to the conclusion that visitors must have joined Nate Champion and Nick Ray in their leasehold ranch, Nolan's old KC spread, between the time of Mike's scout and the Regulators' arrival. Wolcott gave his men—fifty-four, counting two newspaper reporters and surgeon—orders to surround the house, silence the dog, and not to shoot until they could positively identify their targets as being names on the Stockgrowers Association dead list.

The Regulators fanned out, some of them grinning broadly in the masking darkness as a faceless whisper asked Frank Canton if he aimed to get his rifle back. Canton's answering growl betrayed his "techiness" on the subject. Just five months before, he had failed to get either Nate Champion or the \$1,000 reward for him. He had shot too soon and the sleeping Champion had rolled out of his sogans with his gun talking and put Canton and three would-be reward sharers to punctured flight.

The Regulators had all taken their stations—in the barn, behind the creek bank upstream where they had an angling sight at the house, in a ravine behind the house to the east, on the high ground to the west for dropping fire—when the fiddle scraped out "Cotton Eye Joe" and went silent. Then the yellow light winked out behind the window and the Regulators settled down to earn their money by waiting.

The old man went after water and did not come back. His friend went out to see what was the matter and did not come back . . .

About 5.30 by the stars, the cabin door opened and a darker blob came through it. The figure stopped briefly, then came down the path towards the barn, a bucket swinging from one hand. The Regulators pounced on him as soon as the barn masked him from the house. The captive blurted out his name, Ben Jones, and his occupation, trapper. His name might be a "go-by" but his occupation smelled for itself. His captors had no trapper on their list and his story satisfied them. It satisfied them even more to learn that his partner, Bill Walker, was the only other occupant of the house beside their quarry. They stashed Ben Jones under the cutbank under guard and waited for almost thirty minutes before another figure materialized in the doorway of the house and came briskly down the path towards the barn.

This man stepped spang into the muzzles of too many rifles as he rounded the barn but Bill Walker resented being stopped in his search for his missing partner and got buffaloed with a pistol barrel. Rolling him inside the barn, the Regulators settled down to wait, knowing that the next man to show was worth money in their pock-ets.

Nick started out and I told him to look out, that I thought there was someone at the stable and would not let them come back . . .

The sun was just throwing gold on the snow-capped peaks of the Big Horns to the west when the third figure opened the cabin door, stood in it for a hesitant moment, and then strode across the sill. Twenty rifles spoke with one voice as his first step hit the ground. The man fell and the cabin door slammed shut behind him. The

man half-rose to his knees, another volley slammed him down and he began clawing his way back toward the door with biting fingers digging at the hard-packed earth. The ringing rifles hammered at him incessantly and he collapsed against the box that served as doorstep. As he did, the door jerked open and a man with a rifle across his hips sprang through it, shooting as he came.

Encumbered with the rifle, he tried to lift his heavier partner and failed. Back inside he sprang while the rifles chewed splinters from both door jambs. Before a second round could be levered into their chambers, he jumped back outside, shucking the loads out of the pistol in his left hand with a dexterity that showed him to be Nate Champion, with an aim that put The Texas Kid out of the fight. Shoving the gun into his red sash, Nate grabbed Nick Ray under the shoulders and dragged him inside while the Regulators did their unsuccessful best to kill him. The first go 'round ended fairly even—one wounded, one trapped for the Regulators; one wounded, one fortified-up for Nate Champion. Major Wolcott gave orders to besiege the house. It was like having a badger in a den and trying to get him out.

Boys, there is bullets coming in like hail. They are shooting from the stable and river and back of the house. Nick is dead, he died about 9 o'clock. I don't think they intend to let me get away this time . . .

Champion wrote down exactly what the Regulators had in mind when he made that entry in his death record. But Champion was only one on their list, as had been Nick Ray. The bulk of the Regulators were specialists from

Texas, recruited by Frank Canton himself, to give substance to the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association's threat to clean out Johnson County. They drew five dollars a day, grub, bedding, horses, and cartridges furnished, with a bonus of fifty dollars apiece for every killing no matter who got the credit notch. A special train had brought them to Casper in the dim morning of April 7, 1892. They had unloaded their wagons, saddled up, and hit a road-trot northwest while behind them, Ed David, foreman of United States Senator Carney's CY spread, cut the telegraph wires that ran northwest to Buffalo, seat of Johnson County, capital of all those who followed Nate Champion against the illegal fencing, the political powers, the hired gunmen, of the big outfits that could not believe free grass had vanished.

Under Wolcott's leadership, the plan was to hit Buffalo first, clean out the ringleaders there, then swing through Johnson County, until they had checked off every one of the thirty-odd names on the Association's dead list. The newspaper reporters were carefully briefed on the necessity for this action as the column forged on, "keeping the news behind them."

The officials of Johnson County could not, or would not, put an end to the depredations of their citizenry that threatened the big outfits with extinction. One-time riders for the Association outfits who had been discharged after the Big Die of 1886-7 to shift for themselves were building up their own outfits at Association members' expense. These same riders, plus the Kincaid Act homesteaders, were selling *slow elk* and *big antelope* to the Burlington construction crews building down from Billings, Montana to Nebraska. In just

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Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL more than two years ago. When it arrived I did not use it for some time, then one day I thought well I paid for it lets have a go. At that time I was smoking 40 cigarettes a day. I put the APAL in my mouth, and I have never smoked since. To me it seemed a miracle. To sum up, I am feeling good, I can take the children out for a day instead of telling them we cannot afford it, and generally I always have a few shillings in my pocket instead of being permanently broke.
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Dear Sirs,—I thought I would write. I received my APAL some months ago, my family and I have STOPPED SMOKING, so I say thank you.
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Dear Sirs,—It is now almost twelve months since I got an APAL, although I was a chain smoker until the APAL arrived. I have not had the slightest inclination to take up smoking since I got my APAL.
Mrs. E.K., Dublin

Dear Sirs,—Some little time ago I sent for three APALS, for my wife, daughter and self. I was not very popular for doing this, however, since they arrived between us we have saved over £1 on cigarettes. We have completely conquered the cigarette habit. Had this state of affairs been prophesied a month ago I would never have believed it.
P.O., Morthen

Dear Sirs,—One week to-morrow I received an APAL. I never thought that such a small insignificant thing could help me, but I can definitely say that it is the finest cure on the market.
R.B., Nuneaton

Dear Sirs,—My APAL has been so successful that I have recommended it to several of my friends, so please send one to Mrs. M.T.
Mrs. G.B., Lanes.

Dear Sirs,—I purchased an APAL in January and was amazed at its efficiency. I was smoking 45 a day, but now I no longer want to smoke.
M.W., Harrogate

Dear Sirs,—I am sending for an APAL. I have been rather impressed by recommendations received from personal acquaintances of mine.
E.E., Ammanford

Dear Sirs,—I wish to thank you for the APAL you sent me some time ago as I have not smoked since. I am sending for one to give a friend.
Mrs. M.Z., Goldicote

Dear Sirs,—It is three months since I purchased my APAL. Two puffs from my APAL and smoking was cured. Thanks again, and again.
L.H., Pewlands Gill

Dear Sirs,—After some delay I wish to report on the success of my APAL. I received it on the 28th February at 08.00 hours and replaced it for a cigarette, and I am happy to say that I have not smoked since. I was a heavy smoker for 10 years.
E.S., Shorncliffe

Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL only eight days ago, and what a PAL. I stopped smoking right away, no more craving; it's wonderful. I have been burning money for 12 years, now I have the pleasure in banking £1 a week—no more morning coughing.
Miss F.J., Bromley

Dear Sirs,—I want two APAL sent air-mail for my friends, who were rather surprised of the marvellous effect it had on me when I stopped smoking two years ago.
E.F., Tanga

Please send stamped, addressed envelope for full particulars, free advice and PROOF!

HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

(Dept. 45) 245 High Holborn, London, W. C. 1

twelve months, the Association had brought exactly 180 cases to court in Johnson County and obtained exactly one conviction that carried the severe penalty of an \$18.00 fine. To document the Association's claims of losses among its members, the reporters, one from the *Chicago Herald*, one from the *Cheyenne Sun*, were shown the range cattle formula—calf crop times 5 plus bulls minus sales equals cattle—checked against the actual tallies from the beef work in the fall of '91.

The Regulators were forty-five miles from Casper, well into Johnson County, when they stopped with the darkness of April 8 at the TA headquarters, where Mike Shonsy found them. Wolcott explained his deviation from the original campaign strategy to the reporters in terms of Nate Champion's importance as leader of the Red Sash gang, the spearhead of organized resistance to the Association, the hub of Johnson County's published plan to stage their own, independent, "shot-gun" round-up starting May 1, a full month ahead of the Association's schedule for that county—and "the longest rope gets the maverick" only if it is the soonest catch.

It is now about Noon. Boys, I feel pretty lonesome just now. I wish there was someone here with me so we could catch all sides at once. They may fool around until I get a good shot before they leave...

The Regulators could have rushed the house from all sides at once, knowing that Champion could not cover them all. The reason they did not, as Major Wolcott found out, was that none of the besiegers cared to gamble that Champion might elect to make his stand on the side they, as individuals,

might be attacking. They had a reason for feeling this way—Champion threw shots back at them like he was a tribe, from windows, chinking crevices, knot-holes, anyplace where he could get a sight. He had his own rifle plus Nick Ray's and the four he had kept from Canton's ill-starred attempt at ambush. He had his pistols plus Nick Ray's and he kept them all hot. He had plenty of grub and the remnant of the breakfast coffee stood him in place of water. He was manifestly able to stay in that house until hell froze over and then skate awhile on the ice and the only way to get him out was to get the house out of the way. The only way to get Champion's log walls away from him was to reach them in safety and the only way to reach them in safety was with a shield of some kind. Major Wolcott could see the trappers' wagon in the pace between barn and house but any man who tried to reach it was as plain to Nate Champion as the seriousness of his own position. Each side had a bear by the tail and each side knew that darkness was in Champion's favor.

It's about 3 o'clock now. There was a man in a buckboard and one on horseback just passed. They fired on them as they went by. I don't know if they killed them or not...

Jack Flagg, a nester, and his stepson, a boy of seventeen, were the ones Champion saw. The boy was driving a team to the running gear of a 3½ inch wagon, while Flagg rode behind as they topped out on the bench. The Regulators shot too soon at too long a range. Flagg spurred up beside the team, cut the harness so his boy could get a mount, and they fogged up the Buffalo road with far apart tracks. Wolcott cursed their escape but grabbed oppor-

tunity by the tongue. A detail of Regulators seized the abandoned wagon and strong-armed it off the road and behind the barn.

I heard them splitting wood. I guess they are going to fire the house tonight. I think I will make a break when night comes if alive . . .

Working frantically behind the barn, Wolcott's men filled the wagon frame with loose hay under the high seat, then loaded it with pitch knots, dry boards, and anything else that looked like it could burn. Dropping the tongue so they could steer with the yoke and be that much closer to the wagon for protection, Major Wolcott and four volunteers pushed their "go-devil" into the open and headed toward the house.

Well, they have just got through shelling the house like hail. I think they will fire the house this time. It's not night yet . . .

Under cover of the barrage, Wolcott and his helpers got the tail gate of the wagon against the house. Touching a match to the loose hay, they crouched down under the yoke until the smoke thickened, then scattered like quail back to the safety of the barn. Fanned by a brisk wind, the dry logs caught, then roared into a sheet of flame that swept across one wall, broke a window there and swooped inside. Chinking between the logs broke away in places and billows of smoke puffed outward.

The house is all fired. Goodbye Boys if I never see you again.—NATHAN D. CHAMPION . . .

The sod roof would not burn, but with fire inside, the pole rafters and ridgepole did. The flames enveloped the house, making a roaring, crackling in-

ferno that rose above the noise of the Regulators' fusillades and brought pitch sweating out on the barn logs. The Regulators talked among themselves that Champion must have committed suicide since no man could stand the house. The thought, or hope, had no more than found a voice when a Regulator stumbled back from the barn corner with a shattered arm, just as the ridgepole burned in two.

The sod roof dropped into the house, sending up a billow of sparks. The door of the house jerked open and a gout of black smoke gushed outwards. Nate Champion emerged from the murk in his stocking feet, rifle in hand, pistols in sash, clawing at his eyes with his free hand. Darting around the corner of the house away from the barn besiegers, he made for the ravine behind the house to the east.

Frank Canton and two others were waiting there and they let Champion close the range until it was impossible to miss. Their first volley broke his gun arm and drilled both legs. As the rifle fell, Champion clawed at his sash with his right hand. Three bullets tore his chest apart before the front sight had cleared and he fell in a sudden, collapsing convulsive motion like a shot hawk topples out of the sky. His slayers raised the long yell of triumph and the whole body of Regulators clustered around while the burning cabin subsided into Nick Ray's funeral pyre.

Since there was nothing in the little book that they could use, and nothing that could be used against them, it was restored to Nate Champion's vest pocket. To his vest was pinned a crudely lettered piece of paper saying CATTLE THIEVES BEWARE. Then Frank Wolcott looked down at Nate Champion and pronounced his epitaph:

"By God! If I had fifty men like you I could whip the whole state of Wyoming."

Then the Regulators resumed their ride on Buffalo, after telling Ben Jones and Bill Walker to go the other way, after recommending to them that they suffer a severe loss of memory. But the time they had lost smoking out Nate Champion proved the Regulators' undoing.

Jack Flagg and his boy rode into Buffalo with the grim tidings of the siege at the KC buildings. Red Angus, Sheriff of Johnson County, raised a posse and drove Wolcott's forces into a line camp's buildings on Crazy Woman Creek, where they became the besieged for two days until Colonel J. J. Van Horn, commanding at Fort McKinney, brought three troops of cavalry to draw cards in the Johnson County War.

Wolcott surrendered his Regulators to the Colonel and the Red Angus men dispersed. Champion's shattered body and the charred remains of Nick Ray were brought to Buffalo and given a public funeral that beggared anything Wyoming had ever seen before. No one was indicted for their deaths and the Johnson County War dissipated into a series of inconclusive court actions,

newspaper recriminations, political reprisals, and sporadic dry-gulchings that brought Tom Horn to a controversial end some ten years later.

IN THE BALANCE SCALES of sustained violence and number of homicides, the Johnson County War does not compare with the Lincoln County trouble in New Mexico, nor the bitter-end fight in Arizona's Tonto Basin. It simply happened later when the newspapers could, and did, give it sensational coverage for public consumption. But neither the Lincoln County War nor the Tonto Basin fight ever produced such a document as Nate Champion's diary of how a man met death alone.

The spot where the KC buildings stood is sun and dust to-day. Four miles east of the bench beside the Powder, the little town of Kaycee, Wyoming, straddles a highway and minds its own business. Maybe Nate Champion was a "leetle" on the rustle. Maybe he was just a small rancher who wore a red sash to keep his pants up. Maybe he was the not uncommon combination of both.

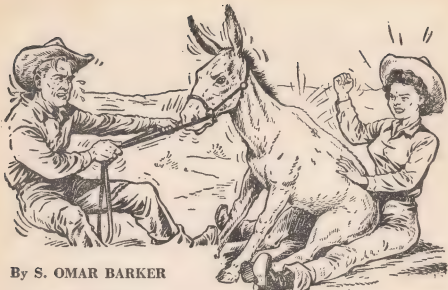
Whatever else he may have been, one thing is certain. Nate Champion was much of a man.



Answers to "Pioneers' Pet Names" Quiz on page 121

1. E
2. I
3. L
4. H
5. A
6. M
7. K
8. O

9. F
10. G
11. J
12. N
13. C
14. B
15. D



By S. OMAR BARKER

CACTUS CASANOVA

Nogal and his palpitatin' palomino partner, Romeo, were dead set on finding grass for some poor but honest cattle—even if they had to commit matrimony with a she-doc-in-a-diaper to do it!

"NOGAL," sighs Romeo as we jog along, "if I had me a wife and kids, I'd git her to bake up a batch of biskits an' invite you to supper!"

"Make it the first Sunday in last week," I says. "Only don't expect me to hold the baby."

"Why the hell not?" says Romeo. "You skeered he'll bite you?"

"It ain't the bitin' end I'm thinkin' about," I says. "I helt one a couple of minutes once while a nester woman choused a rattlesnake out of the wood-

box. Just a leetle feller, not much over a hammer handle long. I never could figger how such a brand-new one could be that leaky!"

"Shame on you!" says Romeo. "You ort to have killed it for her."

"Maybe I ort," I says, "but I hear they hang fellers fer less. It was kinder cute the way it sucked the sweat off my thumb. Salt-hungry, I reckon."

"I never knowed rattlesnakes craved salt," says Romeo. "Was she a widow?"

One of the joys of roaming the range with Romeo Jones is that you never know for sure what he's talking about. Most of the time he don't either—except that it's usually his prospects for matrimony with some female of the opposite sex.

"About them biskits," I says, "ain't you afraid your wife will git busy with the twins an' let 'em burn?"

Romeo don't answer. His big, blond fizzogomy has took on a look as faraway-vacant as a puppy perusin' a pic-

ture book. He fishes an ol' two-bit mouth-harp out of his pocket and starts blow-suck-blowing some kind of a lonesome tune that puts me in mind of the moonlight love call of a sick he-wolf eight-one miles from nowhere and surrounded by nothin'.

He's still wafting his romantic woe upon the drouthy New Mexico air when we overtake a sorry-looking sample of whisker-bearing humanity astraddle of a melancholy mule.

"Howdy, mister," I greet him sociably. "Kinder drouthy, ain't it?"

"Shore is," he says.

"You don't happen to know where a brace of bold buckaroos could latch on to a payroll, do you?"

"Shore don't."

"Don't happen to know who these slab-sided Double Arrow cattle we been seein' belong to, do you?"

"Shore do."

"Yeah? Maybe you can tell me where to find the owner."

"Shore can." He points to the Double Arrow brand on his mule.

"First time I ever heard of a jassack ownin' cattle," I says.

"Nobody but a jassack would, these days," he sighs. "You fellers robbed any banks lately?"

"Not to speak of. You sure you ain't needin' a couple of hard-sweatin', light-eatin' cowhands?"

"Shore ain't. What I need, young feller, is g-r-ass, grass!"

"Supposin' we'd find you some," I says. "Would you put us on your payroll to help hustle the cattle to it?"

"Shore wouldn't," he says. "You find me some grass my critters won't drop dead gittin' to, an' I'll elect you full pardners in six hundred and forty-seven head of as pore cattle as ever

dragged their tails through a cuckiebur patch!"

"It's a nickel-plated deal!" I says. "This here's a purty big country. There sure ought to be grass in it somewheres that a feller could beg, borrow or steal."

"Shore ort," he shrugs. "But shore ain't."

Meantime we've come to a leaning post with a sign board on it. Between a couple of arrows pointing opposite directions it says: "10 MILES OR FUTHER."

"Ten miles whichaway to where?" I inquire. "Or does it matter?"

"Shore don't. There's three ways to git to my place: one thataway, one thisaway, or fly in on a buzzard. They're all ten miles or fu'ther, an' not worth the trip when you git there. Either of you boys happen to be a preacher?"

"Not to speak of," I says. "Why?"

"Thought I might git you to call the Lord's attention to how dry it is," he says. "But never mind. I reckon it ain't Sunday."

"Ever' day is Sunday when you're out of a job an' ain't eatin' regular," I says. "Excuse my ear wax, but did I hear you invite us to come eat supper an' spend the night?"

"Shore didn't. But if you like cuckiebur gravy flavored with rabbit tracks, come ahead."

He starts off without waiting to hear whether we aim to accept his hospitality or not. But I've already decided not. We've still got a couple of cold tortillas in our saddlebags from the last sheep camp we raided, and if this ol' ooot is as hard up as he makes out, we might have to share 'em with him.

"Hey!" Romeo hollers at him. "You got any she-stuff at your house? A daughter or a female grandson, maybe?"

"Shore ain't," the ol' Jassack rider calls back over his droopy shoulder. "Not any more."

"He sounds kinder sad about some-thin'," I says as we ride on.

"Hell," complains Romeo, "what's the country comin' to when a man his age ain't even got no female descendants? I figgered he'd have a beautiful but lonesome granddaughter with brown velvet eyes an' a lovin' disposition, an' prob'ly I'd marry her an' inherit them six hunderd odd cattle he spoke of. Then while me an' her was enjoyin' a short but brief honeymoon, you could hunt up some grass to fatten 'em on, an' first thing you know we'd be prosperous enough to send the kids off to college."

"Yale or Harvid?" I inquire.

But Romeo has gone back to sighing sweet sorrow through his mouth organ again.

After while we come to an arroyo where a seep has made a few puddles of water in the cow tracks.

The water turns out to be a leetle too thick to gargle and a leetle too thin to chew, but it's still got sort of a wet taste to it, so we tank up good, both us and the horses.

"Nothin' like cow-track water to clinch a man's thirst," says Romeo, "but I sure wish that ol' jassack rider had of had a granddaughter."

We ain't rode more than another mile when all of a sudden Romeo quits playin' his mouth-harp.

"Nogal," he says, "let's ride down thataway. I heard somethin'."

I listen, but all I can hear is some of that cow-track water gut-gurgling inside my horse. Romeo points his chin towards an arroyo off to our right.

"Nogal," he says, "I'll bet there's water down there."

"So what?"

"I'm thirsty," he says.

"Either you're a liar," I says, "or you've sprung a leak. What's happened to all that *agua* you took on a few minutes ago?"

"Shucks," he says, "you know how it is on a hot day, Nogal."

"I know how it is with you any day, you Cactus Casanova," I says. "What makes you think there's she-stuff in that arroyo?"

"Why, Nogal," he protests, "I don't know what you're talkin' about!"

But he does. When we slope off into this arroyo we come onto one of the goofiest situations I've seen since the time I caught ol' Pan-Head Perkins playing marbles with a prairie dog. It's a big-hatted, hot-faced little human heifer in high-hitched pants trying to lead a scrawny little black burro across a sand seep with one hand and push him with the other. The human nature of the jassack being what it is, she ain't doing much good at it. How Romeo knowed there was a gal down there is more than I can figger, unless maybe he had overheard some of the remarks she is making to a long, limber-looking, red-headed cowpoke setting sideways in his saddle off to one side, calmly rolling hisself a smoke.

"Darn your pig-headed picture, Rusty O'Brien!" we hear her scolding him as we come closer. "If you can't be gentleman enough to help me, why the dickens don't you go on and peddle your papers?"

"You come might' near bein' purty when you're mad, Tootums," remarks the cowboy. "Whyn't you try twistin' his tail the other way? Maybe it's a left handed burro!"

Busy with her burro business, the gal ain't noticed our approach. Of

course the cowboy has seen us coming, but he don't pay any more attention to us than a bull to a bug. At least not until Romeo anchors square across his bow.

"Looky here, cowboy," Romeo bristles at him, "you crippled or somethin'? Why ain't you lending this here lady due aid and assistance—like a decent cowboy ort?"

"That would be a fair question," says the cowpoke calmly, "if it was any of your bucktoothed business."

"I'll make it my business!" snorts Romeo. "I'll—"

"Make away," shrugs this Rusty cowpoke. "I don't see nobody ahold of your shirt tail!"

The gal leaves the burro and comes over there. Most heifers ain't much to look at when they're all sweated up, but there's two or three items about this one that it's awful easy to notice. One of 'em is the neat way she shapes out a pair of Levi saddle pants. Another is all them sweat-ringlets of purt near black hair showing from under her pushed-back, barbiqjeoed buckaroo hat. Still another one is the gleam in them big brown eyes. She flashes a look at Rusty and one at Romeo.

"Sic 'um!" she says.

I reckon the only reason that don't trigger off the fight is because I barge in between the two big yannigans with my hand on my hawleg and lay down a little leather-backed law.

"Looky here, you jugheads," I says, "what the hell's the sense of either of you fightin' a total stranger when neither one or both of you will even know who he has licked or got licked by when it's over? Besides, I'm goin' to shoot the ears off both of you if you try it!"

"Your second argument is plumb

convincin'," grins Rusty O'Brien. "I ain't hardly mad enough to make it a good fight anyhow. What do *you* say, tall-blond-and-blunt-headed? Shall we postpone this little hair-pullin' till our acquaintance has time to ripen into sweet personal hatred?"

"It's up to this here little lady," shrugs Romeo, batting his crockery-blue eyes at her plumb personal. "If she says fight, I'm ready. If she says—"

"A nice fight would be jolly," busts in the gal, batting her big brown ones right back at him, "but right now I would rather have some help getting this poor donkey started so I can take him on into the Haven."

"Into the what?" says Romeo.

"Why, the Heppelmeyer Happy Days Haven for Homeless Donkeys, of course," she says. "Haven't you heard of it?"

"Why, sure," lies Romeo. "That's the very place we was headin' for, ain't it, Nogal?"

"You been headin' for the jassack farm ever since I've knowed you," I says, "but—"

"You better keep away from that burro layout," busts in Rusty O'Brien, "or they're liable to tie a ribbon on your tail!"

"You keep your loop out of this, high-pockets," the gal advises him, plumb snippy. "And if you haven't got urgent business elsewhere, see if you can't think up some! We certainly don't need you here!"

"O. K., Tootums," shrugs the redhead, starting to ride off. "Any word you want to send to ol' Sag-Britches?"

"Not by you!" she snaps back at him, and he goes yonderly.

"Excuse my inquisituality," says Romeo, "but did I hear that turkey-necked buckaroo call you 'Tootums'?"

"Don't let it gefoozle you," shrugs the gal. "He's liable to call anybody anything. Now if you'll just be kind enough to help me get this—why—why, look!"

I done have. Once he's quit being pushed at, the little black burro has strolled on acrost the seep and climbed out of the arroyo of his own accord. We find him up on the flat, chawing away at the stirrup of a saddle on a bay pony that turns out to be the gal's.

"Why, you ornery little dickens!" She slaps him on the rump to shoo him away and he comes within an inch of planting the print of burro heels on her chin. Romeo comes heroing in and grabs the burro's hackamore rope.

"I'll lead the booger for you," he offers. "Whichaway's this whatchamacallit you speak of for jassacks?"

"About five miles off that way. But you mustn't call them that name. They're donkeys."

"Where we come from they're burros," I says. "An' a damn noosance."

"That's just the point," explains the gal. "They have been called 'burros' with connotations of contempt for so long that Dr. Heppelmeyer says it is bad for their morale."

"Hell," I says, "I don't see where what they're called has got anything to do with nosebags!"

"I don't mean *morral*," explains the girl patiently. "I mean 'morale'. Dr. Heppelmeyer says that calling them 'burros' contributes to their feeling of inferiority. This gives them a sense of insecurity, which in turn is a contributing factor toward an emotionally unhappy id."

"Is that a fact?" I says. "I always figgered burros was too dumb to be unhappy."

"Oh, but they're not! What they

crave more than anything else is love and affection!"

"So does this palpitatin' palomino pardner of mine," I says. "In fact, I'd better warn you that—"

"Dr. Heppelmeyer feels that it is part of our social obligation to donkeys, as an underprivileged minority of the four-footed folks, not only to see that they are sheltered and well fed, but also to encourage their self-respect. That's why she prefers to have us call them 'donkeys'. Don't you see?"

"I see that this 'un ain't goin' to lead good unless somebody gives him a little rump-whackin' with a rope," I says, unlimbering my twine for that purpose.

"Oh, no, you mustn't wallop him!" cries the gal. "It depresses his id! Besides, Dr. Heppelmeyer wouldn't like it!"

"Neither would the burro," I says, "but it would take a little of the balk out of him."

However, it's her jassack, so I let her handle it her way. She steps off her horse, gets behind the burro, calls to Romeo to start pulling gentle on the front end, while she pushes from the back. I don't know how come it unless he's too busy battin' his eyes at the gal, but somehow Romeo lets his dally slip right when the *burrito* is setting back the hardest on the lead rope, and the little booger sets smack down in the gal's lap.

"Why, you ornery little dickens!" she cries. "Get up off of me this instant!"

But the burro seems to like it there.

"All he craves is a little love an' affection," I says. "Give him a hug an' maybe he'll kiss you."

But she don't seem to be in much of a burro-huggin' mood.

Believe it or suck eggs, it works. When Romeo climbs on his cowpony and tries to lead him again, the little booger sets back on the rope, same as before, but when Romeo's mouth-harp plays "She Was Only a Woodchopper's Daughter, So He Had to Ax Her Paw," the burro leads right along. Her riding up front along side Romeo, the gal don't notice me reach down and give his tail a twist every once in a while. The burro's, I mean.

"Well, I'll be a donkey's aunt!" "You're wonderful!"

"I'm mighty glad you realize it," says Romeo modestly. "Say, that Rusty roosteroo ain't your feller, is he?"

"That stiff-necked steer-walloper?" she sniffs. "You saw how he acted, didn't you?"

Which don't exactly answer Romeo's question, but he goes on mouth-harping without seeming to notice it.

About four "Dying Cowboys" and a couple of "Home on the Ranges" farther along we slide over a hill into a big wide valley and hit a stout eighth wire fence that don't look to be more than a year or so old. Outside this fence the grass is set off to the roots,

but inside there's a fine stand of black-headed grama grass tall enough to tickle a billy-goat's belly. It's the kind of cow-dinner that even a gal-bewitched buckaroo like Romeo can't help taking note of.

"By the great gazookus, Nogall!" he exclaims. "There's grass we could eat-ten them Double Arrow bony-backs on it we could git ahold of it! Who you reckon it belongs to?"

"Uncle Sam, I expect," I says. "Nothin' but gummin' money could build that fancy a fence."

"Ow!" she squeals. "Get him off! The darned little dickens is mashing the ear out of me!"

I don't have time to ask her what kind of talk is that for a young lady.

before Romeo goes into action. Of course all he would have to do to undo this darned is just take a new

daily around the horn, give his cowboss a touch of the spurs an' yank the burro into the middle of next week. Instead

he piles off, runs back there and lifts him off. Of course that puts him handy

to help the gal up. He also starts helping her brush the dust off the seat of her pants, but apparently she ain't

broke to stand for that kind of attention from the opposite sex. She pushes his hands away and wiggles out of reach.

"Gosh, are you hurt, 'Tootums?" says Romeo with one of them calf-eyed smiles he's subject to around the women.

"Hahd't I better lift you onto your hoss?"

"No, thank you, I can manage," says the gal, dodging him again and climbing on her pony like a regular ranch-raised cowgal. "And my name is not

'Tootums! It's Mary Ellen Migs!"

"It's an awful purty name, 'Tootums," steps Romeo, making out like he has to straighten a shirtup for her. "Miss or

Mrs.?"

"Miss, of course," she says, sortering outting her eyes down at him the way these fellers do. "But you can just call me Mary Ellen. I didn't mean to sound

rude—and I do thank you for getting that darned burro off of me!"

"Donkey," I says, but she don't pay me any mind.

"You can just call me Romeo," smiles Romeo. "You like mouth-harp musico?"

"Maybe the burro does," I says. "Why, that's an idea!" exclaims

'Tootums. "Why don't we try it?"

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But the gal says no, it belongs to Dr. Oriole Heppelmeyer, owner of the Heppelmeyer Happy Days Haven for Homeless Donkeys.

"Of which," she explains, "I happen to be the B. S. in Charge of R. R. R."

"Now wait a minute," I says, "what them first two letters stand for where I come from ain't—"

"Never mind getting funny," she busts in. "Here they stand for Big Sister in Charge of Rescue, Repatriation and Rehabilitation. In fact, my remuneration is partly determined by the number of displaced donkeys I can find and bring in."

"Well, I hope you get paid for two-legged ones, too," I says. "But if you try much Big Sis stuff around Romeo Jones, you're liable to find yourself wooed, wed an' wonderin' why before you know it!"

"Won't that be nice?" she smiles. "Here's the gate where we turn in."

"Hub-uh!" I protest. "Me an' Romeo have got to see a man about a mud-hole."

But once Romeo has met up with a maiden, specially as purty as this one, you'd just as well try to head off a locoed elephant. In through the gate we go, burro and all. The road winds down through a wide valley with as purty a stand of black gramma grass as you ever laid eyes on, and nothing grazing on it but a few bulge-bellied burros.

About sundown we come to the headquarters. It's one of them big, old-fashioned, rambling adobe houses with big cottonwoods all around. Only this house has been fresh plastered and painted pink. There's a long row of open faced sheds painted pale blue, with half a dozen burros stalled in them, and I'll be a horny toad's aunt if

most of them ain't got double-bow purple ribbons tied on their tails about halfway between the switch and the swivel.

Out in the yard a couple of Mexkin cowboys seem to be trying to hold a big ol' gray jack burro still while somebody without no clothes on except a pink breastband and breechin' ties a ribbon on his tail. There's a heap of sunburned epidermis in sight on this person, and it don't take but one look to recognize it for she-woman meat, and plenty fat.

As we ride up she finishes her burro-tail ribboning and comes running to meet us. She don't look to be over five foot high, her somewhat graying hair is tied up at the back of her head so it hangs down her neck like a horse tail, and besides a pair of Mexkin *huaraches*, them pink pants that don't reach halfway to her knees and the pink doo-hickus around her boozum, all she's got on is a pair of big rimmed glasses. She don't even seem to notice me and Romeo.

"Oh, joy and gladness!" she chirrup, grabbing the little black burro and hugging him around the neck. "Welcome to Happy Days Haven, little Oscar!"

"Excuse my curiosimosity," I says, "but what makes you think his name is Oscar?"

"Because that is what I have just this moment christened him," she says. "The first step in restoring their self-respect, to these poor derelicts of the desert, is to give them a personal designation. How would you like to go through life without even a name?"

"It would beat bein' a jackass named Oscar," I says.

But she ain't listening. She gives the

burro another hug, then I'll be a mud-hole mugwump if she don't kiss him on the nose.

"Oscar—dear little Oscar!" she coos—and Oscar sneezes right in her kisser.

Her rosy-apple face turns even redder than its sunburn. She takes off her glasses and wipes the sneeze off on them bedroom britches she's wearing. From the blaze in her bright blue eyes it looks for a jiffy like she's fixing to wallop little Oscar one on the snoot. But she don't.

"Come Oscar!" she says firmly. "Pedro and Toribio will give you your bath!"

The two Mexkin cowpokes slip a pink cotton-web halter on the little burro's head and start to lead him off, but Oscar don't budge.

"*Caramba!*" mutters one of the *vaqueros* under his breath. "For why she no let somebody tweest him her tail?"

"Be a nice little donkey, Oscar," begs Pinky-Pants, "and go along with nice Pedro and nice Toribio to the nice bathroom!"

Oscar still don't budge—except to kick at her when she pats his rump.

"Maybe he knows it ain't Saturday," I says.

"Romeo knows what to do," suggests Tootums, cutting her eyes at him. "When he plays the mouth-harp the little booger follows him like a pet puppy."

"Oh, joy and gladness!" chirrups Pinky-Pants. "Which one is Romeo?"

"Me," admits Romeo. "But I been blow-suckin' this dang wind strainer till my lips is too sore to play it any more—that is, without a little kiss or somethin' to cure 'em."

It's Tootums he's hinting at, but it's Pinky-Pants that answers him.

"Oh, joy and gladness!" she coos, and starts towards him.

Prob'ly all she wants is to borrow his mouth-harp, but Romeo ain't taking any chances. He climbs back on his horse in a heap big hurry, being the first time I ever see him back off from any she-stuff. Meantime the burro decides to follow Pedro and Toribio of his own accord. One way and another, what with Pinky-Pants pausing to swat a horsefly off a part of her sunburned anatomy that I ain't used to seeing uncovered on the female sex, it's sort of an embarrassing moment. I see Tootums, choking back a giggle.

"Nogal," says Romeo, "I ain't sure but what we better be driftin'?"

"Oh, no, please don't go yet!" urges Tootums. "It's almost suppertime."

"Oh, joy and gladness," I says. "Besides, I want to see this ol' Doc Hoople-meyer that owns the place an' see if we can't talk him out of some of this fine grass for ol' Sag-Britches's cattle. You reckon the ol' coot is anywheres around?"

"Old coot, indeed!" says Pinky-Pants. "I am Dr. Oriole Heppelmeyer! And every blade of grass on the Happy Days Haven is reserved for the rehabilitation of derelict donkeys, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Nogal Smith is the name," I tell her, "an' if you'll excuse my sayin' so, Doc, I sorter expected the famous Dr. Heppelmeyer to be some ol' buck-nun with whiskers down to his brisket, not a plumb charmin', rosy-jawed young heifer like you! Now about leasin' some of that grass—"

"Tsk ts! You naughty boy!" She shakes a pink fat finger at me. "Flat-tery won't get you any of my nice grass—but after such a charming speech you *may* remain for the evening repast if you wish. Pedro and Toribio will

care for your horses as soon as they finish giving Oscar his bath, and Mary Ellen will conduct you to guest quarters where you may perform your own evening ablutions. The Orchid Suite, Mary Ellen. And the topic for discussion at dinner will be *Psychic Limitations of the Libido in the Genus Asinus*. Toodle-oo, my dears!"

"Great goshawful gazookus!" sighs Romeo as Dr. Heppelmeyer goes toodle-toddlng off to see how the *vaqueros* are making out with Oscar's bath. "Ain't education wonderful!"

"Specially the rear view," I says.

"All them big words," says Romeo, "purt near makes me wish I'd stayed on through the fourth grade!"

"She means," explains Tootums with a grin, "that what we're all supposed to talk about at supper is the love life of the burro—I mean donkey. I trust you won't find it embarrassing."

"Not after what I've seen here this evenin'," I says.

"Y'know, Tootums," sighs Romeo, "I'll bet *you'd* look good in one of them two-piece git-ups *yourownself*! I can jest imagine—"

"Don't bother," busts in the gal dryly. "All right, cowboys, if you're ready to wash up, I'll show you the hoss-trough!"

"Young lady," I says as she heads for the house with us, "from the way you git on a horse an' set a saddle, you've got the earmarks of a ranch-raised cowgal. How come you tied up with a crazy outfit like this here?"

"That," she says, "is none of your business. But if you really want to know, I'll tell you. I got orphaned by a tornado when I was little and my grandpappy raised me—on a cowranch. He insisted on sending me off to college even though he couldn't afford it, but

after I got educated he expected me just to come on back and keep house for him on the ranch, the same as before, and he got so mad at me when I took this job instead that he won't even let me come to see him any more. He says this Haven for Homeless Bu—I mean Donkeys—is a lot of durn foolishness that I ought to be ashamed to be mixed up with. He thinks it's a crime to fence grass just for worthless bur-donkeys—while cattle go hungry. Dr. Heppelmeyer has tried to be friends with him, but he thinks she's crazy as a hoot owl."

"Seems to me like I noticed a few symptoms of loco myownself," I says.

"By the way, who's this Rusty O'Brien you got so bristled up at back there at the arroyo?"

"Oh, him!" she snorts. "Sometimes I'd like to wring his neck!"

"Just say the word," offers Romeo, "an I'll hunt him up an' wring it for you!"

"I'll keep that in mind," she says. "Here's your diggin's, cowboys. This is your bedroom. If the bunks are too soft you can sleep on the floor. That's the door to the hoss-trough yonder. If you want to wash out the canyon, there's both a tub and a shower, only be careful you don't drown yourselves. Any pink stuff you find lying around isn't candy—it's soap. Supper will be in just twenty minutes right over there on the *portal* across the patio, and Dr. Heppelmeyer expects everybody to be on time. *Hasta luego*—and good latherin', cowboys!"

"Just a minute, Tootums," says Romeo, grabbing her by the arm. "Why don't you let me make matrimony with you an' take you away from all this?"

"If you feel like you've got to marry somebody," laughs the gal, slipping out

of his holt like a slick bar of soap, "why don't you try Dr. Heppelmeyer? She's the lady with the money!"

"Maybe I will," sighs Romeo, "but I figgered I'd give you first chance."

"Omittin' matrimony for the moment," I inquire, "how much wages you reckon this she-doo-in-a-diaper would pay a couple of expert jassack nurses like me an' Romeo if we decided to sign on?"

"More than you'd be worth. I expect," shrugs Tootums. "All I know is she pays me twenty-five dollars a head for every burr—donkey—I bring in—besides my salary as Big Sister. If it just lasts long enough maybe I'll be able to save enough to pay Grandpa back for sending me to college. So don't you gazaybos try to beat me out of my job, you savvy? Now go on in and get washed. I've got to run change myownself!"

"Twenty-five dollars a burrol!" gulps Romeo as the gal goes skivvoting across the patio. "Nogal, yonder trots the future Mrs. Romeo Jones! Whyn't you marry the other one an' make it a double-header?"

"Whyn't you go teach your Aunt Lizzie to milk horny toads?" I says.

The bathroom is liver-pill pink and all polished up like a bartender's glass eye. We make out all right, except that there's a full-length looking glass, and being the first time Romeo has ever had a good look at hisself all the way down, he purt near makes us late for supper, just admiring the view.

Not counting the Chinese cook and his Mexkin wife that helps him serve it, there's eight of us for supper: Doc Heppelmeyer herself in a high-toned, low-boozumed silk dress, Tootums, Pedro, Toribio, me, Romeo and two other burros with ribbons on their tails.

"We take turns inviting different

ones of better rehabilitated children of the desert in to dine with us," explains Doc Heppelmeyer. "After all, in their own way, they're people, too."

"I've always knowed a lot of people was jassacks," I says, "but this is the first time I ever knowed jassacks was people!"

"Jassacks?" Doc Heppelmeyer feeds each of the burros a biscuit and arches an eyebrow. "What quaint language you use, Mr. Smith. We call them donkeys. Would you care to open the discussion, Mr. Jones? What is your theory regarding sublimation of the characterial libido in the genus asinus as compared to the genus homo?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Doc," says Romeo, "the way I see it, some do an' some don't. Another way you look at it, a heap depends on the weather. Like in the winter it's cold. In the summer it ain't. That's why you never can tell whether things are goin' to turn out different or purt near the same but not quite. You take a big, healthy, good-lookin' man like me, for instance—"

"I'll take a biscuit," busts in Tootums.

"Hmml!" says Dr. Heppelmeyer. "A most interesting viewpoint, I must say! And what is your opinion on the subject, dear Mr. Smith?"

"My opinion," I says, "is that it ain't no ways right to fence off all this fine grass just for a bunch of no 'count burros when there's honest cattle needin' it!"

"Indeed!" Dr. Heppelmeyer swells up like a poked horny toad. "I'll have you to know that I paid good money for this place, I own the grass and I shall continue to do what I blessed well please with it!"

"Sure," I says, "but you got ten times as much grass under fence as your burros can possibly eat. Now if you'd just

lease me an' Romeo grazin' rights for six hundred and forty-seven head of practically starvin' cattle, it would not only give a couple of pore busted buckaroos a new start in life, but also—"

"Mr. Smith," she busts in. "Your proposition is unthinkable! Please let us hear no more about it!"

Of course me and Romeo ain't got any money to pay for a lease anyhow, but whenever you've got both cattle and the grass to run 'em on, you can purt near always find some fool banker that will stake you.

"These starvin' cattle I speak of," I says, "belong to a pore but honest ol' gentleman over north, who—"

"So I suspected," busts in the she-doc, buttering another biscuit for the burro at her elbow. "No, Mr. Smith, I have come out here from St. Louis to devote my life and my fortune to the rescue and rehabilitation of homeless donkeys and nothing you or anyone else may say or do can cause me to deviate from my purpose! You may inform Mr. Balboa Updegraff, as I myself have heretofore informed him a dozen times, that he will have to seek grass for his cattle elsewhere, because—why—why look, here comes little Oscar! How sweet!"

It's the little black burro all right. He comes strolling across the patio onto the dining *portal* like he owned the place or at least held a first mortgage on it. The tie rope is missing from his pink halter. He has just rolled in the dirt while still damp from his bath, and as soon as he gets close enough to do a good job of it, he shakes himself, and showers damp dirt all over hell's half acre, into the chuck and everywhere else, including a sizable chunk down the front of Doc Heppelmeyer's low-necked dress.

Her complexion flares up red again like when he sneezed in her face. For a second it looks like she's fixin' to throw her silver coffeepot at him, but finally she controls herself.

"Oscar," she says, shaking her finger across the table at him, "you are a bad little boy! I fear I shall have to—"

She don't get it said, because at that moment Oscar clamps his teeth onto the over-flap of the table cloth and calmly gives it a yank that upsets all the dishes and would have jerked 'em all off on the floor if Romeo hadn't grabbed him just in time.

"Oh, joy and gladness!" grins Tootums, cutting her eyes at Romeo. "My hero!"

The lady Doc looks plumb ready to blow up, but she don't quite let herself come unripped.

"Oscar," she says firmly, grabbing a fly-swatter off a hook on the wall, "I fear I shall have to discipline you!"

"Not too hard, Doc," I says. "You're liable to discombooperate the pore little feller's psychopology, not to mention depressipating his emotional arterioskellerosis."

That stops her. "You are so right, Mr. Smith," she sighs. "For a moment I almost permitted my uninhibited irritation to infiltrate the realm of sweet reason. Pedro, will you and Toribio kindly take this darned little bur—donkey out and give him another bath!"

Pedro and Toribio take a try at it, but Oscar won't budge. So Romeo fishes out his mouth-harp and is just starting to try and toll the little booger out when all of a sudden we've got visitors.

It's the red-haired cowpoke called Rusty O'Brien and Mr. Balboa Updegraff, otherwise known as Ol' Sag-Britches. The ol' man has got the cucumber combed out of his whiskers,

and except for his shirt tail out, looks all slicked up.

"Hi, Tootums! Hi, Doc!" breezes Rusty. "What seems to be the main trouble here?"

"Nothing that you need concern yourself about," says Tootums, plumb snippy. "Was it you, by any chance, that turned this darned little bu—donkey loose and shoved him in here?"

"Why, Tootums!" grins Rusty. "Can't a couple of perfect gentlemen come to pay a little social call on a couple of fair but foolish ladies without you git-tin' all suspicious?"

"Social call, my hind foot!" sniffs Tootums. "If you and Grandpa still think you can persuade—"

"Any gal," busts in ol' Sag-Britches with his whiskers-a-bristle, "that deserts her pore ol' grandpap to be a jackass nurse ain't no granddaughter of mine!"

"Now, now, dear Mr. Updegraff," says the she-doc, patting him on the shoulder, "we must not permit our personality to become warped by undue perturbation. Wouldn't you like a cup of my nice hot coffee?"

"Shore would," grunts Sag-Britches, "but I shore ain't goin' to take it—not unless you're ready to lease me some grass for my starvin' cattle!"

"In that case, gentlemen," says Doc Heppelmeyer, "you may consider the interview terminated!"

"Which means," shrugs Rusty, "that we've rode sixteen miles for nothin' again, Gran'pa. We might as well git to hell outa here before somebody ties a ribbon on *our* tail!"

On his way out Rusty gives Oscar's tail a twist that purt near makes him run over Romeo.

"By-by, burro-boy," he says, "an' don't go gittin' no notions about my gal or I'm liable to appear unto you!"

"Your gal, hell!" sputters Romeo. "If you think—"

But Rusty don't wait to listen.

As quick as I get the chance I slip out and ketch up with 'em out beyond the burro sheds. "Hey, Mr. Updegraff," I says, "does that partnership proposition still hold good?"

"Shore does."

"Gimme a week," I says, "an' I'll have grass for your cows—if I have to commit matrimony to git it!"

"H'mm!" grunts ol' Sag-Britches and they ride on away.

That's how come a couple of cow-work-in' cattle-pokes like me and Romeo happen to be combing the canyons for stray jassacks at five bucks a burro, plus vittles. The lady Doc promises to raise the ante five bucks more every five jassacks we jangle in, till we're up to twenty-five pesos apiece, which is the same as she pays Tootums.

One trouble is that Pedro, Toribio, and the gal have done combed the country so plumb clean of burros already that by the end of the week me and Romeo ain't been able to fetch in but four, and one of them a mule. Another trouble is that Romeo spends more time trying to bamboozle the gal into promising to commit matrimony with him than he does hunting jassacks. To hear Romeo tell it, he's making mighty fast progress, but I ain't so sure.

"Three times I've had her just *purt* near to let me kiss her, Nogal," he brags. "Jest gimme time an' I'll slip the halter on her one of these days before she knows it!"

"Yeah," I says. "Jest gimme wings an' I'll fly, too!"

Meantime I've been doin' a little romantic pantin' around the lady Doc myownself. Not that I hanker for

double harness, but I've got my neck bowed to get ahold of some of that fine grass for them Double Arrow cattle one way or another, and if I can't discourage her out of the burro-haven business any other way, maybe that'll have to be it."

"Trouble is," I tell Romeo, "Doc keeps so dang busy psychologizin' burros she ain't got no time for romancin' with an ol' bowlegged cowpoke."

"That ought to make it easy," says Romeo. "The way she hugs an' kisses them jassacks, all you got to do is git down on all fours, waggle your ears, an' switch your tail a little, an' you've got her!"

But it ain't as easy as he thinks. Not with that little black burro named Oscar around. Dr. Heppelmeyer has got what she calls a course in mental and emotional rehabilitation that she puts all the burros through, which entitles them to a ribbon on their tail for a diploma when they graduate, but little Oscar just ain't what she calls a "co-operative case." Which means he can figger out more ways to raise a little quiet hell around the place than a turned-loose tiger.

No matter how she has Pedro and Toribio tie him, he always manages to bite the rope in two, bust the halter, or git loose some way. Then he spends the night chawing diplomas off the tails of all the graduated burros in the stalls. He turns on the hydrant and floods the patio. He noses open the toolshed door, drinks half a bucket of pink paint, spills the rest all over three kegs of nails and staples that he has knocked over, then can't find the door and jumps out the window, taking the sash with him. He sucks the ol' milk cow every time he gets a chance, bites six inches off the Chinese cookie's queue,

chows Tootums's underpants off the clothesline, stomps chickens, teases horny toads, and brays half the night at the moon.

One evening I'm setting by the lady Doc on a bench out in the patio, aiming either to try and talk her out of some grass or myself into some matrimony. I'm just slipping an arm around her flank to see whether she'll buck, when little Oscar strolls up behind us, grabs hold of the hitch to that pink doohickus she wears for a shirt and yanks it off. My arm being where it is, naturally she thinks I done it, and the only reason I ain't the only living cowboy that ever got his head knocked off by a female Ph.D. is because I'm an awful quick dodger.

That terminates the interview. You naturally can't expect even a she burro-analyzer to set out in the patio with an ol' buck-nun without no coverage above the belt line.

"Oh, perdition!" she cries, and takes out for the nearest door like a shot-at coyote huntin' timber.

Next morning she gives Oscar a severe scolding, but it don't seem to change his ways any. He won't lead when she wants him to, he won't stand when she wants him to hold still, and he'd just as soon kick her as waggle an ear. She can't even use the magic of Romeo's mouth-harp any more, because Oscar has swiped it out of Romeo's hip pocket one day and dropped it down the well.

"I'd tie him up with a log chain and wear out a few buggywhips on him if it was me," I tell the lady Doc.

"Oh, but we must not resort to compulsion," she objects. "The poor little fellow is simply suffering from an inferiority complex caused by some emotional repression of early childhood,

probably mistreatment by a cruel father. Gentle guidance through love and affection is the only cure!"

But I can see her patience is wearing sorter thin, and it gives me an idea.

To make it a short hog and soon scraped, one day she decides that she will go ahead and award Oscar his diploma anyway.

"Who knows?" she says. "Perhaps his emotional instability is a mere symptom of jealousy, and once his id is given status by the privilege of wearing a ribbon on his own little tail, just like the others, perhaps little Oscar's unsocial behaviorism will vanish!"

Whatever she means by that, it's a hot afternoon and Romeo is off up the creek helping Pedro and Toribio give a couple of jassack recruits their bath. Tootums has rode off somewheres by herself, and as you couldn't get the Chinese cook near a burro for love nor money, there ain't nobody around to help Dr. Hepplemeyer award Oscar his graduation honors except me.

Oscar lets me lead him up onto the graduation platform as docile as a dew-drop. I take a firm holt on his hackamore and stand at his head while the lady Doc, in pink halter and shorts all fresh clean for the occasion, opens the ceremony.

"Dear little Oscar," she intones sweetly, "in recognition of your sweet and gentle co-operation and in token of your emergency from emotional retardation into adult donkeyhood, I hereby award you this diploma, this lovely purple ribbon, which I shall now attach to your person—and if you try to kick me while I tie this thing to your tail, I'll bat your darned little brains out!"

So saying, she reached for Oscar's tail, and the second she touches it—

whambo! Little Oscar not only tries to kick her—he succeeds. Both heels ketch her smack in the stummick—and it happens that they ain't none too clean.

Dr. Oriole Heppelmeyer says "Oomphi!" and sets down so hard she bounces. She takes one look at Oscar's hoofprints on her middle and gets up redfaced and a-r'arin'.

"That settles it!" she squalls. She grabs up a board and deals Oscar a wallop across the rump that knocks him and me both plumb off the platform. "I'm done! Finished! Quit! I hope I never see another damn burro as long as I live!"

"Yes, ma'am," I says. "In which case, maybe you'd like to lease me some grass for oattle?"

"Why the hell not?" she snorts. "As soon as I can take a bath, come up to the house and we'll talk business!"

"Oh, joy and gladness!" I grin. "While you're washin' the burro tracks off your stummick, I'll run fetch Romeo!"

My soring little Oscar's tail by sticking pins in it so he would be sure to kick her plenty hard had proved out purty smart, but where I made my big mistake was not closing the grass deal right then and there instead of riding off after Romeo.

When I got back with him, our mouths all fixed to make a deal that would put us on the road to prosperity and set him up good for offering Tootums to marry her, there was three saddled horses at the hitchrack. Setting in the shade of the patio *portal* cheerfully swigging lemonade, we find Rusty O'Brien, ol' Sag-Britches Balboa Updegraff, Mary Ellen Tootums Miggs, and Dr. Oriole Heppelmeyer, all togged out in a decent dress for once.

"Excuse me for interludin' the mer-

riment, Doc," I says. "But about leasin' me that grass—"

"Oh, sadness and sorrow!" she busts in sweetly. "You see, since Mary Ellen has effected a reconciliation with her dear grandfather, and we're quitting this darn donkey-haven business anyway, I have already promised to let dear Balboa put his cattle on my grass on a partnership basis. In fact," she wiggles and giggles, "it is not improbable that we may even make the alliance matrimonial!"

"Shore ain't," grunts Sag-Britches. "If it'll git me grass fer my cows!"

At the same time I see Rusty O'Brien slip his arm around Tootums—and she don't buck. But Romeo Smith ain't no hand to give up easy.

"Speakin' of matrimony," he says, "Tootums, how about you an' me—"

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Romeo," busts in the gal. "But you see I got tired of burro wrangling, too. So today I rode over to tell Grandpa I'd decided to come back to the ranch with him, and

Rusty was there, and after all, he and I *had* been engaged before—"

Romeo don't wait for her to finish.

"Nogal," he says, "let's git!"

"Wait up a minute, boys," grins Rusty as we start out of the patio. "If you'd be interested in buyin' a nice bunch of burros, I happen to know where's some for sale cheap!"

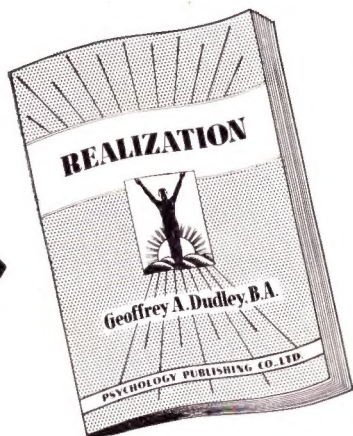
Romeo's answer to that, as well as our final farewell to the Heppelmeyer Happy Days Haven for Homeless Donkeys, is a thumb to his nose and seven wagglng fingers.

Climbing into our saddles, Romeo looks at me and me at him and we both grin.

"Nogal," says Romeo, "all we need now is a couple them ribbons on our tails!"

Half a mile out on the trail to wherever our rangeland rambling may take us, I happen to look back, and believe it or suck eggs, yonder comes little Oscar plodding along, switching his little sore tail, follering us!





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A ROARK FOR A BUCKLEY by Marvin De Vries

An exciting novelette of a bitter feud. With Buckleys fighting Roarks every time they meet, it looks like a lead-pipe cinch for a scheming rustler gang to reap a stolen-beef fortune. Then hot-headed Coe Buckley meets a Roark with hair like cornsilk, and he begins to think more about a wedding than about fighting a feud.

CACTUS CASANOVA by S. Omar Barker

Another hilarious adventure of that brace of bold buckaroos, Nogal and Romeo. They sign on as top hands at a haven for homeless donkeys and—to make it a short hog and soon scraped—are lucky to get away alive.

I RODE WITH THE TEXAS RANGERS as told to Harold Preece

In Part I of his story, *Hell on the Border*, Ira Aten relates his experiences hunting bandits across the Mexican line as a member of Texas's famous mounted police force.

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